Analog

A *Disparate Minds* Novella
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There's places for making sense
Look at the stars for instance
But here in the red
In the avenue
Behind the wood
Here we know we aren't going to be seen
We dream of timeships and skulls and hyperspace down here
In our niche little corner
Industrial and dull
Waiting

—Elegy for the Disparate, Verse One, 22/3/9/4.2/Acorn

Part One
An Introduction to the World of the Disparate, the Town of Avenue, the Girl named June, Locked Rooms, Beginnings of Nostalgia, Eventual Cigarettes, and Saturday Night

June breathed a sigh of relief, collapsing onto the shitty motel bed. It was a beige room and a dull maroon bed. The pillows were lumpy. June did nothing to stop the forces of gravity from slowly sliding her handbag down her hanging arm and off the side of the bed, onto the floor. She was exhausted. She nearly fell asleep.

Except for her sudden and sickening realisation that actually, holy hell, she hadn't been in this room until five seconds ago when she had started falling onto the bed.

What was she doing here? Where *was* she?? She jumped out of the bed tersely. The floor was cold underneath her bare feet. She put on a pair of socks. It seemed logical until she had them on, and realised she didn't know where *they* came from either.

Two Roads Diverged Within A Wood and Sorry I Could Not Travel Both I

The room was slanted, like a Dutch angle in a film. On the bureau, there was an ancient, boxy television. On the wall, there was a black and white print

of the Last Supper. The walls were a disconcerting and unlikely shade of beige-y red, which reminded her of nothing so much as some sort of sick.

It was dark, the blue light of the television overtaking the room. Nothing was on the television screen but the static colour. It pulsed, it had a beat to it — not a real beat, not a musical one, but a dull pattern.

There was a deep discomfort to the room, like a sort of liminal space. Everything was and wasn't. June's lip quivered. She debated whether to yell out for help, in some effort to find out what was going on, but somehow the idea of someone else *hearing* seemed much worse than the prospect of remaining uncertain of her whereabouts. She should not be heard. She absolutely *shouldn't* be heard.

I don't mean to be rude, but I think it is ridiculous to have ears on the sides of one's head. It certainly looks ridiculous. You ought to take a peek in the mirror someday and see for yourself.

Luckily, she didn't hear *that* either. Though it was decidedly familiar — it was distant. Like something you heard in elementary school. Something from a long time ago.

She looked over the room once more.

The walls are maroon, plain, and almost designed to be uninteresting. The colour was all that really could be noted about them. The bedsheets matched the light of the television, flickering blue. The curtains are light satin, there are two thin twin beds, (she had not noticed precisely how small they were before), a small bathroom in the corner, and a kitchenette with a solitary minifridge. Those were the things in the room.

The things in the room

No no no no no no no no —

She would say it was a fragmented room, a dangerous room that didn't all fit together, but the most frightening thing about it was how very close to normal it felt — a function of how well it fit together, arranged almost uncannily. Yes, uncannily.

And everything's *going*. Woah!

She's hearing so many things. And none of them make sense to be hearing. English Literature, mainly. Which is something you hardly ever *hear,* so scratchily aching out of your ear. You read it, don't you. And what she's hearing isn't someone speaking it out loud, anyway — she's somehow hearing the text itself, in fragmented hiccoughs.

Holding a cassette tape. Holding the cassette tape, and looking at it. It's not a cassette tape, it's a VHS tape. And you should put it into the VCR. You should. There's even a sticky note on its side, telling you to:

PLAY ME

June remembers VHSs. And VCRs. Old things, right? There's an inkling of the 90s to them. She remembered when she got a big box of *Scooby Doo* VHS tapes when the video rental store went out of business — what was it, 2008? 2010? Some sort of Netflix-y thing happened to it. But the nice old lady had said she was a loyal customer, and—

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

It's not here right now. You don't have to get excited. It's never coming in here.

She places the VHS into the VCR, thinking about how she doesn't know what they stand for. The names, acronyms. Well, the V is probably for *Video*. But she has no clue about the other letters.

There are no markings on the tape.

Then it's the click and shuffle and kerchunk of the player swallowing the tape whole. The plastic flap closes, enveloping the tape. It's electric. Literally, it's electrically powered. You have to plug it in. Wait, doesn't she have to rewind it first? Isn't that what you had to do every time, back in the day?

No, it doesn't seem so. Doesn't seem this tape's ever been watched. Or at least the last person rewound it, out of courtesy. If there was a last person. If June isn't the only person in the world.

She turns on the television as the player whirrs and rattles.

On the television: blue, staticky, strained. Artefacts buzz and flicker on the screen. Is there dust…? No, no dust! Nice and clean!

...and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes

CLASSIC LITERATURE! Very fine stuff. It's not on the television though. It's in the air. Listen. And of course, look. Look deep into that blue static. It may be blue, it may actually 100% empathetically *be* blue, but it's black as midnight. Look at the TV, the gogglebox, and stare in contemplation.

On the television, if you look, on the television, you see, June you see June, breathing a sigh of relief, collapsing onto the shitty motel bed. It was a beige room and a dull maroon bed. The pillows were lumpy. June did nothing to stop the forces of gravity from slowly sliding her handbag down her hanging arm and off the side of the bed, onto the floor. She was exhausted. She nearly fell asleep.

Except for her sudden and sickening realisation that actually, holy hell, she hadn't been in this room until five seconds ago when she had started falling onto the bed. And —

The tape skips a bit? It's a few seconds later and —

There was a deep discomfort to the room, like a sort of liminal space. Everything was and wasn't. June's lip quivered. She debated whether to yell out for help, in some effort to find out what was going on, but somehow the idea of someone else *hearing* seemed much worse than the prospect of remaining uncertain of her whereabouts. She should not be heard. She absolutely *shouldn't* be heard.

No no no no no no no no, June nearly screams.

This was on the television. This was what just happened, a moment before.

That's not her. How is that her? How is she watching her?

PLAY ME

What kind of esoteric nightmare is this? June is paralysed, looking at the screen, watching recursion on an infinitesimally small scale. The June on the television looks so weak, so rough, downtrodden — *does* she look like that? She scrambles in her pockets for a mirror. No, why would there be a mirror in her pockets? Are you stupid?

Beasts of England, beasts of Ireland,

Beasts of every land and clime,

Hearken to my joyful tiding,

Of the golden future time.

The television screen is still going. Now, it's just a few seconds behind her. Five or ten, maybe. Consistently. As she freaks out and tries not to scream and cry at the insidious wrongness of the world, the slam poetry nonsense of it, the June on the screen is doing something else, until, of course, five or ten seconds later, when the June on the television freaks out and tries not to scream and cry at the insidious wrongness of the world, the slam poetry nonsense of it.

The world seems spliced together by a poor editor. Past and present, is and was — tenses tussling like ravenous alley-cats.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets

June reaches for the remote, tries to rewind the television. Trial and error will surely figure out some of this. She winds back, back through the *What was she doing here?* and the *Where is she?* and she goes all the way back to before she was on the bed. The buzzing of the rewind, that slow but friendly whine of the player *reaching* back, trying to get to where it was before.

And what happened before again?

* * *

The world is suddenly different. There is no transition between the two.

Wallpaper! Familiar wallpaper. She's 23 again! Three whole years! Three whole years ago! June is twirling her head, admiring the first person view of things. How she's missed it. It hasn't gone anywhere, but she did miss it.

She didn't miss the conversation she was having — which was perhaps the opposite of the nonsensical day she was having. It was entirely *too* sensible. Well, that wasn't the right word, her mother was hardly sensible.

"Honey, you've got to make something of your life," her mother is saying.

Her mother is covered in mascara, eyeshadow, golden-blonde and… and *orangey-red* hair, in a big beehive. She's dolling herself up for a party. She has so much makeup, so much elaborate eyeshadow — well, there's something trying-too-hard about it. She almost looks like a drag queen. Except that drag queens look friendlier, generally — more alive and happy. Forget it. It's fine. Everything is fine.

"Oh my *God*, mom," June sighed. "I have a job."

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain, sweetheart," her mother says, even the word 'sweetheart' sounding withering and impoverished.

June nods. Her mom's right. Her mom's usually right. She will have to get a different job.

Typical! That's the word. Not sensible, typical. Everyday. Every Day.

Beautiful normalcy. This is her house. Her house she shares with her mother, her dog named Sparkles, and hopefully, someday, a nice boy or special someone or something. The bookshelves are full and inviting. The TV is new, not some sort of ancient hell. She isn't in an empty hotel room, she's in life. The life she remembers.

She reaches out and hugs her mother. "It's good to see you," she says — she had missed her, and —

"Don't touch me," her mother hisses, slapping her away, mouth pursed like she's been chugging lemon juice. *"I don't want you to touch me."*

June feels the wound again. Oh, right. It hurts on multiple fronts — that this *was* what happened, that her mother would behave that way and that she should see it again, knowing what *would* happen. And that she should do it all the same.

Her mother moves over to her laptop, begins furiously scheduling. "I have a salon appointment at two, June. And a meeting at four. Can you get out of here by then?" She phrases it like it's not a question.

June sighs. "Of course, Mom." *Of course, Mom*. Because that's what she said before. She would say something different now, wouldn't she? But she can't. When you rewind the tape it isn't suddenly a different film, is it?

Her mother looks at her, all steel and brass and fine silk but only on her dress. *"Thank you,"* She says, her mouth all consonants and sharp mouth sounds. "Get Momma a beer from the fridge."

June turns to obey.

* * *

It's another day that was a has-been day, a while ago. More memories. June is on the internet, searching for jobs in the nearby area. The Walmart website's job interview program gave her a computer virus last time, as strange as that sounds, so she's trying to be careful. It is late at night. 11:00 PM.

The door swings open. Her mother enters, noisome and rambunctious. Knocking over the box with the dog leashes by the door. She's intertwined in a man's arms — the man is, what? Half her age?? Only a few years older than June, actually. "*Ohhh, Sydney!!"* he moans. He's taking off her mother's dress. She tries not to look at anything. Tries to be anywhere but here.

June quietly closes the laptop and tries to leave the room as the drunken cavorting proceeds to increase in volume. Why is everything with her mother so sick, so over the top? Why is this the second one this *week?* She can still hear the car in the driveway's radio *blast,* vibrating through the walls — it's Elton, she thinks.

Saturday All Right For Fight! Night All Right Saturday For Night Right All Saturday Right's Fight Night For Right Saturday Fight Right All For Saturday Nigh I what what what what Night Sunday

* * *

Hotel room. Blue light on those beigey-red walls. June's doing her best. June's trying to keep it together, June's not gonna break down right now, uh huh, June's gonna June's gonna *go*

The quiet moment of decision hangs low and sharp. June is remembering that moment. Remembering what she's done.

Why is this happening? she asks herself. *What did I do to deserve any of this nonlinear waffle? Why?*

Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why.

Oh, like *that*'s helpful. June huffs. She doesn't even know a third of these damn quotations that just appear around here.

There's that feeling in the air again, of evil — is that the right term? — and that heavy wet feeling. Like school lunch applesauce in a damp paper bag. A bit of that awful electronic vape smell.

Watching the June on the television, watching her pull back and push away from her mother, from the man, from Elton John blasting in the parking lot. Why did it have to be a *good* song? Couldn't it have been a *bad* song that was ruined for her by association?

Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by —

June tries to search the room for cameras. She's being watched somehow, she knows that. So — I mean, the logical thing to do is try and stop that, right? Searching the wall is an almost pointless endeavour. She can find no cameras. She runs her hands over the wall again to be sure — presses down on the plastery wall, looking for panels or something, but no, it is an entirely solid paste, the kind of wall that you don't think about. The kind of wall that is a wall.

She looks over the room once more.

The walls are maroon, plain, and almost designed to be uninteresting. The colour was all that really could be noted about them. The bedsheets matched the light of the television, flickering blue. The curtains are light satin, there are two thin twin beds, (she had not noticed precisely how small they were before), a small bathroom in the corner, and a kitchenette with a solitary minifridge. Those were the things in the room.

June moves over to the desk in the corner of the room — motel room. This definitely isn't a hotel room, this is a motel. All one floor. She's not sure how she knows so clearly. Is it because of the window? She moves from the desk to the window, and draws open the deep blue shades to see nothing at all through the window but thick thick paint texture, bumpy and oily. She's going mad. That has to be what's happening. She's going mad. She goes back to the desk, which she probably should have inspected first to begin with.

Throwing open the drawers — and wondering if the desk was noticeable when she first came into the room, if it was really here at all, she finds nothing in the hotel drawers whatsoever. She had hoped that there would be a key or something, if not a key, then something to unlock the problems in her life, let her out of the room to run away.

Repetition is a funny thing. It's a word which means Repetition, which is a funny thing. It's a word which means—

Why isn't there an explanation? There should be an explanation. Life isn't like paintings.

When you go to an art show, and look at a painting, it's an object that exists for its own sake, its own integrity. It can be analysed, interpreted, but never explained. Paintings don't have a consensus. Life isn't like that. Life is *logical*. It's why science was invented! June bangs on the wall.

"CAN YOU HEAR ME," she bellows. There is nothing. At least, nothing new. There are still the voices in the background, barely registerable.

She doesn't know what to do about the voices. If she focuses, she can hear every voice. But she doesn't want to. There are too many, and they're all spouting garbage about timeless hybrid wolves and the Archons in their great twirling inversion against the fallen house and the hyperspace and the scary

baby. She obviously doesn't get any of it. It's likely a symptom of her going mad, the most logical explanation to what is happening.

A smirking, pursed voice smiles. *"Say something nice."*

"SHUT UP!" She yells. "SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!"

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.

She doesn't need that. She really doesn't need to hear any of this nonsense, she just needs to get out of this room. She needs to get out of this stupid life where nothing she does matters, she needs to make something of all of this, on her own, like she should have a long time ago.

You need to take care of me, her Mother's voice says. Stupid lies. Her mother would never say that. That's just what *she* thinks, sometimes, in the dark, trying to fall asleep.

But she's not trying to fall asleep now, she's trying to… what is she doing? She looks over the room once more. The walls were maroon, plain, and almost seemed *designed* to be uninteresting. The colour was all that really could be noted about them. The bedsheets matched the light of the television, flickering blue. The curtains were light satin, there were two thin twin beds — she had not noticed precisely how small they were before —, a small bathroom in the corner, and a kitchenette with a solitary minifridge. Those were the things in the room.

She's hungry. Is there food? June leaves the desk and its empty drawers, passes the beds, and goes up to the mini-fridge aside the bureau where the television lies. She opens the fridge.

There is a *hand* inside the fridge. Completely disconnected, a human hand, lying there, inside the fridge, right next to the ice packs. It is dirty, embalmed in grease, and grime, and — for lack of a better term — dirt. Just plain old dirt. Mud. It has a good deal of dried blood upon it too — the reddish black sits there in little solid specks, at certain points indistinguishable from the

mud. One of the fingernails is torn off completely, and at the other end of the hand, there is a stump which grinds off into a sharply cut bone. Quite unlike the bloodied hand, the bone is spotless, white, polished like ivory — although it's only, what, two inches long? The point is, there's a hand with a bit of bone on the end of it where there definitely goddamn should not be a fucking hand with a bit of bone in it oh my god what the *Hell.*

June struggles not to vomit, and closes the fridge.

She hyperventilates, holding her hands to her mouth. She wants to scream again. She's not going to scream again. Her throat still hurts. She's not a screamer.

Fuck!

The click of the VHS tape kerchunks in the television, entirely of its own accord. June bites her lip, nearly drawing blood. She rushes over to the television, no longer hungry.

It's fast-forwarding.

She can see in quick succession, her life up to this point, her on the bed, her watching the television, her searching the wall, the desk, finding the hand in the fridge, and now it's still going, and the fast-forwarding is speeding up. She's still moving around the room, searching places she hasn't seen yet, running around, bouncing on the bed out of boredom, throwing a lamp against the wall to *feel something,* several hours in a matter of seconds! She's looking at… the future. What she's going to do next. What television-June is going to do next, of course. One's own feelings on the matter, what we want to do with our lives, are entirely self-determined. She's not going to be dictated to by a shitty television, she's not —

"Hello, June."

Now there's a black — brown? — woman in a silky black dress on the television screen, as if the channel has been changed. She's middle-aged, and she's beautiful — *gorgeous*, in that 'famous actor' kinda way. Regal, but not strictly above-it-all. Just a little imperious; respectable, not unapproachable. *Classy*.

Her hair is a larger pixie cut; not very frilly, or curly, but full. Her bangs conceal her forehead. The cocktail dress is flattering to her curves — which aren't 'next top supermodel' but entirely real, making her look even better than if she *was* a supermodel (at least, in June's opinion). Her earrings are two simple silver balls, and they sparkle. They match her equally silvery, equally sparkling eyes.

"Make a good first impression," the woman says. She pauses, long. "Sorry about all of it. Must be careful."

"Who are you?" June asks, quite desperate.

The woman doesn't say anything, her mouth is sternly closed. Obviously she can't hear. Why would she be able to hear? Eventually, another sentence, precisely chosen. "Listen. Listen to the aria."

There is no aria. No choir of voices, invisible or otherwise. No beat, no melody. There is utter, encompassing silence, silence so thick and deep that June hasn't ever heard a more silent silence.

"Call me Anthea," says the woman whose name is, evidently, Anthea. She pauses again, trying to choose her words carefully. As if she mustn't ruin it. "You are trapped in a patchwork cacophony, June. It is analog, material. But who is there?"

"I don't know what you're saying," June tries to tell the television, but being a television, it obviously can't hear.

"*Who's there?*" Anthea says, now considerably desperate looking. Static is beginning to encroach the sides of the screen. "It is not a question, but it is."

June doesn't know what to say. This Anthea is talking to her like some kind of French new wave film or something. Over a gap. Pasta through a strainer.

"*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?"* Anthea asks, though once again, it is grammatically a question, but is said like a statement. It's frustratingly open. And also Latin. But as if that wasn't obscure enough, she goes on to ask: "What are the laws of it?"

Fuck fuck speak normal —

Anthea opens her mouth frustratingly slowly once more. "Hands and shades of red."

June can't handle this goddamn woman, what's going *on* —

"The mist of Nostalgia —"

The TV stutters and goes black. June sighs. Goddamn it. Who did she piss off, exactly, to get into all of this? She pays her taxes. She's a good citizen. Right? Is she a good person? She hopes she's a good person. Sometimes she puts recycling in the trash when it's convenient, and then she thinks about that a lot afterwards, and it weighs on her, but like, otherwise, surely she's not done anything *wrong* chiefly? Is this purgatory? Purgatory ought to be more grey and infinite than beige, right? And besides… and besides, if that's the kind of setup she's dealing with, wouldn't she deserve to go to Hell, after what happened to Mom?

She lies back onto the bed, running the cryptic clues through her skull.

She has no idea.

* * *

June tries to think to herself about what to do. She could fiddle with the television more, but that could do *anything*, couldn't it? Better to establish some sort of form of method, logistics.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

June wasn't sure she thought so logically before all of this. She had always found herself to be an open minded person, willing to take whatever happens in stride. She did yoga. That was a spiritual thing. Apparently, however, all it took was a strange circumstance to make her a complete and total sceptic. When did she become, like; a scientist or something? Quotations rummaged

through her head. Or perhaps that rotating Book of Quotes was simply one of the cacophony of voices around her that didn't seem to go away.

She looked over the room once more.

The walls are maroon, plain, and almost designed to be uninteresting. The colour was all that really could be noted about them. The bedsheets matched the light of the television, flickering blue. The curtains were light satin, there were two thin twin beds, (she had not noticed precisely how small they were before), a small bathroom in the corner, and a kitchenette with a solitary minifridge. Those were the things in the room.

Doing nothing was a frustrating endeavour. June prided herself on being productive. Or at least feeling like she was doing something. To tell the truth, she probably *wasn't* all that productive, always thinking about something else. Sure. But she enjoyed *feeling* like she was being productive. In this room of stagnation, it was difficult to attach that feeling to anything, albeit as small as playing with LEGOs or some sort of frivolous productivity. There was absolutely nothing to do in here. Motel rooms were meant to be slept in — you charged reasonable rates for the room that was simply good enough, or narrowing in on good enough.

They weren't meant to be home, they were meant to be halfway. Not in the sense of a halfway home, but places that are quite literally halfway between the place you're going *to*, and the place you're *leaving*. You don't stay in a motel if you're on vacation.

And yes, there was something very specifically halfway in this room in general.

Halfway, perhaps, between what's real, and what isn't. Like a pretentious film. She kept thinking about those, didn't she? Maybe she didn't have any other real reference point.

Whose hand was it in the fridge?

Should she try and sleep?

What was the woman called Anthea trying to tell her?

And why was Anthea so familiar? …No, she wasn't familiar. She didn't know Anthea at all, and she was certain of that. There wouldn't be some distressing connection there. It wasn't familiarity, it was similarity. It was just something in the lines on Anthea's face, something that reminded her of her mother. That slight duplicity. The curl at the edge of their mouths.

…There always had to be something to remind her, didn't there? Shit.

Maybe she was reading too much into this. But she had a lot of time, and really, to tell the truth, she could afford to try and read into things. Because she sure wasn't going to have a good night sleep in this bed, that was something she was quite certain of indeed.

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

The oddity of the room wasn't simply great — it was overwhelming — it was *total*. The dichotomy between noise and silence was omnipresent in her mind. That was, if she was going to think about it in fancy pretentious words.

She looked over the room once more.

The walls are maroon, plain, and almost designed to be uninteresting. The colour was all that really could be noted about them. The bedsheets matched the light of the television, flickering blue. The curtains are light satin, there are two thin twin beds, (she had not noticed precisely how small they were

before), a small bathroom in the corner, and a kitchenette with a solitary minifridge. Those were the things in the room.

And of course, the television itself.

It was the key to all of this, right? The odd thing in the aggressively dull and empty room.

Well, probably the hand in the fridge was very important too. But the television had to be *something*, right? June didn't want to turn on the television, didn't want to tempt fate into another horrific sequence of something or other where she didn't know what was and wasn't was. And now she was getting so worried, her thoughts weren't grammatical. Well, even less than before. She felt her tenses had been muddled since she got here. Have been. Will have been. Are.

What a *strange* world.

She's getting tired now. Nothing strange is happening to time, but it feels late, and her thoughts are blurried and ephemeral. She is in the snow.

26 years old and she's wasted her life.

She breathes a sigh of contention, collapsing onto the shitty motel bed. It was a beige room and a dull maroon bed. The pillows were lumpy. June did nothing to stop the forces of gravity slowly slide her handbag down her hanging arm and off the side of the bed, onto the floor. She was exhausted. She nearly fell asleep.

She nearly began to dream of the man, the man stomping the cigarette box into the rain puddle. That was when it began, wasn't it? It began with that and children's books. That was the origin.

June tries to speak to someone. But…

Oh, never mind. She isn't sure what she would have said, anyway.

The television is on. When did it turn on

June is on the television. Another June is on the television. Maybe there is one June, maybe there are two Junes, one on the television, one not.

"Which one of us is official?" June asks. Is it one of the Junes, is it the only June is it *"Which one of us is on the television?"*

Is the recording live?

There are two Junes, at least now that is absolutely certain. There has been a solidification. But one of them is on the television, and one of them isn't.

At least one sentence that Anthea spoke to June is beginning to make sense.

Who's there?

Yes. Things are plural. Why else would someone ask who's there, but if they don't know who's there?

Which one of them is there?

This is getting exhausting. June didn't ask for this.

Let me go let me go let me go please I don't wanna be here

unlock the doors and let me leave

watch me go go go

me go go go

"But which one of us is going to leave?" one of the Junes asks.

Well, the voice voice is thick, and malevolent, and it might be June saying it.

That music! The same music that her mother was listening to — Elton John? *Saturday.*

The two of them are in the room. One of them has stepped out from behind the television. June looks at June. "June," she says in recognition, or perhaps just to say it.

* * *

June is packing her bags. That is, *metaphorically speaking*, she's packing her bags. She only has one bag. She's never owned much. She knows it's what needs to happen. It is a black moonless night outside her bedroom window.

She's trying to decide whether to leave a note. Part of her knows her mother might not even care. But — but it's the proper thing to do, isn't it, to leave a note when you run away? She decides to. It's been too many years, twenty six whole years, of trying to make things work here for her to not —

She opens her bedroom door, and moves down the hall, the floorboards creaking. Down the hall and leave the note on her mother's dresser. It's a simple thing to do.

Creak. Creak. She opens her mother's door, and places it, alongside a bundle of food stamps and money that hopefully won't be used for more drugs.

She does so without crying. It's difficult.

Down the hall and turn. It's a small house; it doesn't take long. The night is dull, almost purple with the dappled and faded moonlight. She's at the front door. She reaches out, places her hand on the doorknob.

…She looks back.

She looks at her mother on the couch, staring blissfully into infinity with a needle in her arm.

"Goodbye, Sydney," she says, because that is her mother's name.

It's a good gesture, June thinks. To remove the responsibility from her. You don't have to be a mother anymore, Sydney. You… you don't have to worry about it.

And for a moment, she does consider staying. To make sure her mother gets some help. But — no. Her mother has had years of her help. Weighing on her.

This can't last.

She can't keep up the pattern. She has to get away eventually, she's an adult now. What would she be like, doing another twenty years of this?

But God, she's a wreck. Too many men, too many drugs. She needs *someone* to watch over her. And if that isn't her; who is there?

To say that time stands still is a cliché, because time always moves inexorably forward. Nothing happened to time at all. It just felt like it had stopped, for June, in the quiet moment of decision. She wonders what Jesus would do…

She opens the door, and leaves without looking back, because if she does, and sees her mother's doped out eyes on the sofa, she will stay. She cannot consider for one moment more, because then, she will turn around. Thoughts in her head ring full of hatred, and they are not for her mother. They are her own private thoughts, for her alone.

This is the cruellest and perhaps bravest thing June has done to date. She vows never to forgive herself. Because *that* would perhaps be an easier thing to do.

* * *

The click and shuffle and kerchunk of the player swallowing the tape whole. The plastic flap closes, enveloping the tape. It's electric. Literally, it's electrically powered. You have to plug it in. Wait, doesn't she have to rewind it first? Isn't that what you had to do every time, back in the day.

Oh, good thing they remembered that. It definitely had to be rewound. So, it's a proper VHS player, that's good. They have to rewind to the start of the tape to get any watching done. Anyone considerate should have done this to begin with.

oh dear oh dear oh dear

The two Junes are looking at each other. They're both desperately hoping that time travel is involved and that the VHS hasn't scanned them like some kind of evil malevolent photocopier, some fiendish device that has made such a good copy that one of them could replace the other and no one would know oh God no one would know.

Funny how that's the first thought — the thought of being replaced, to be not yourself in yourself. It's perhaps a more familiar thought than June is giving it credit for.

Isn't that what VHS tapes were best at? Back before cable, the thing to do was to record your favourite programs. June remembers when she was young she got her mom to record *The Smurfs* on a VHS tape, but *The Smurfs* aired so much and after so long it filled up the entire thing just like that. Every once in a while, Mom would try and make things better by fixing something small, anything, and acting like that stopped everything else. Her mom…

…was probably fine right now. Focus.

Both of the Junes were wondering if the other June was thinking the same thing right now. Both had the same memories of entering the room first. Seeing the other exit the television.

"I was here first," June says, as if that solves anything.

"You weren't," June hisses back. "I was."

This is all so very tedious. They circle each other, not angrily, not viciously, but each trying to get a look at the other's backside, almost as if they do, the rest of them will be missing.

But it isn't.

It would be easy if one of them was obviously evil, and they could yell "No, shoot the *other one*!" to someone else, but there was no one else. It is a crisis of identity, complication is twisting around them with its thin little tendrils.

It would also be easy if they could coexist, but no, they were aware of the threat the other posed to them and its sheer significance. One can replace the other. While the other remains, they are never safe. It's existentialism.

And the most frightening thing is that they really aren't all that different. They're each thinking the same things about the other.

June bit her lip. She wasn't going to let this happen. She has-had fought for her life so far, and no copy was-is going to kill her and take her place. There

is nothing that can change that. She tries to think of anything she can do, but there is that same nothing.

Logically, these things must make sense, there must be a riddle to it. Well, maybe this hotel room doesn't make sense, but surely that Anthea woman wasn't speaking total nonsense, however it sounded.

The other June is creeping towards the Kitchenette. She rummages through the drawers, looking for a weapon. Some sort of knife or scissors or rolling pin but there's not anything. June had already looked.

For the first time in a while, she hears a voice. And remembering, she tries to listen closer.

And the words are there, around her, that which had begun with nothing but noise and had transitioned to nothing, is still there, still with her if she listens. She can hear them! She can hear the aria around her if she only *listens* —

And Anthea is right; it is a cacophony. Bursting around her, through her ears, through her eyes, spewing words she never knew and things she never heard but now, sentences that meant little outside of context, words from yesterday and tomorrow.

"Raindrops and waffles with syrup—"

"Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow creeps in its petty pace from day to day—"

"You're a beautiful woman, probably."

"We felled the Urmafrae, just as you foresaw to be necessary—"

"Tyger, Tyger, Burning Bright—"

"Something strong."

"It is a truth universally acknowledged—"

"The forces of stagnation are —"

"GONE FISHING"

"I appreciate the offer Tirion, I really do. If there wasn't a war —"

"To Sherlock Holmes she is always <u>the</u> woman —"

Every voice she's ever heard and billions she hasn't. Lots of Shakespeare and authorial quotations. Repeated phrases, bearing their way into the world, creating grooves and ridges. Fiction and Non-Fiction bearing down on her hard.

In them, there is an assuredness to be found. June feels it. In this thin gossamer room, there is everything. Except there isn't. It's just voices.

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation.

Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present — at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

What else did Anthea say? Make a good first impression?

Well, June decides that this other June sure isn't going to forget her. She balls her hand into a fist, and she swings, the cacophony echoing in her ears.

Fighting your double may well be an infinite process, one with no clear winner available. Unless you get the first few hits in, and fast. June thinks of herself, thinks of her own durability, remembers what she can and can't take.

She's overconfident. The other June hits back, slamming a fist into her knee. She buckles. They grapple each other, onto the ground. It's not like the films.

June's been thinking about the films, the books, because, well, who doesn't? It's not glamorous, it's not choreographed, and it doesn't even have the decency to be rough and tumble and dirty, no soldiers in the muck, just two Junes rolling around and punching each other on the floor of a motel room. Stop hitting yourself. Stop hitting yourself.

June feels a tooth break as the other June clubs her in the jaw. She catches the other hand as they swing again. They both try and push against each other, equal in strength and speed.

Actually, this might go on for some time, June realises.

It's like a dance, but as said, not a choreographed one. It's two teenagers on prom night realising they have to dance and they don't really want to but there's a social obligation and they're just sort of wiggling.

It's like that but they're trying to kill each other.

Other June slams into June. "How do we know which one of us is real, June?! How do you know it's not me!?"

"Ditto," June spits, kicking June in the stomach.

The seeds of doubt are laid, but the situation is no less primal. Nonetheless, the chance of victory for either is getting tenuous. They're just as strong as each other, and it's starting to devolve into a bit of a double-handed arm wrestle.

June makes one last gambit, because otherwise, this'll go on forever. Overextending herself just a bit, she swings her hand into the side of the television, bringing it down from the cabinet.

She quickly tries to move back from the other June with the best of her strength. She only gets a few inches away, dragging herself on the floor, but it's enough, and the falling television slams onto the other June's head.

Suddenly the other June isn't there, the shape of her vanishes, promptly, not fading out or warping away, not beamed up, but simply, plainly, absent. June leans over, and lifts up the television — whose screen is now broken — out of curiosity. Underneath the broken television there isn't any remnant of a body whatsoever, save for a disconnected, outstretched hand — her hand — *the* hand. It is covered with a strange mud-like substance, which seems to be leaking from the television's inner circuits.

She holds the hand to her own. It is absolutely the same, except for the additional damage, and the whole not-being-connected thing. It sends a chill down her spine. She can't bear to look at it, she has to put it out of sight.

She opens the fridge, to find it empty. She places the hand inside, and closes it.

She looked over the room once more.

The walls were maroon, plain, and almost designed to be uninteresting. The colour was all that really could be noted about them. The bedsheets matched the light of the television, flickering blue. The curtains were light satin, there were two thin twin beds, (she had not noticed precisely how small they were before), a small bathroom in the corner, and a kitchenette with a solitary minifridge. Plus, of course, the broken television lying on the floor leaking a strange brown fluid. Those were the things in the room.

And of course, the door, the way out. Which has always been there.

She runs to the door — how did she not see it, and she unlocks it with the key that is now in her hand.

It leads to another, identical copy of the room. Not precisely identical, actually. The sheets on the bed are changed. And there isn't a broken television on the floor. There's no television at all. But the familiar, constricting walls are enough to dredge up the voices of pain and sorrow in her chest. *Never going to be free, are you June? Might as well give up, huh?* She strides forward, not listening to her stupid stupid head and she pushes at the door, which has always been there, because the room is identical. She unlocks it with the key.

It is another identical room, except the wallpaper is slightly lighter in tone from the thick maroon. She strides forward, keeping the thoughts away. She is making *progress*. She is going *forward*.

Another room. Another door. Key in the lock, turn the key, turn the doorknob, Another room, another door. Key in the lock, turn the key, turn the doorknob, another room, another door. *Another* doesn't even feel like a word after a while, like what happens when you say your own name over and

over and over until you're only hearing the phonetic sounds of it. Another room. Another door. Key in the lock, turn the key, turn the doorknob.

No giving up. No listening to yourself, because you're your own worst enemy.

She doesn't need to be told another goddamn mindfulness technique. She needs to work. She needs to push forward. She needs to get away. And she will.

Another room, lighter than before in tone. Now it's a thick red room, not maroon and dark, but neon-sharpie-marker red. The kind of undiluted red you get in artist kits.

The first step is always the hardest. But you have to keep going. She has to keep going. She does. She keeps going, ramming through the rooms. Another room, another door. Another room, another door, key in the lock, turn the key and the doorknob and another room another door.

More and more rooms, from that marker kit red to a more of a cherry red to a purpley red to starting to get a bit pink, to barely pink at all to stark white. A complete gradient.

Key in the lock, turn the key, and the doorknob.

Outside.

A parking lot. A grey, ordinary motel parking lot. She can see the motel sign, labelled:

Big Gazpacho's Motel / Motorlodge

It's written in frustratingly blunt letters, the same thick maroon she had seen inside, in her room.

Leaning on the sign, next to a grey windowless van, is Anthea, in her cocktail dress and gingerly smoking a cigarette with one of those long fancy handles like it's the 60s or something. She brings it down from her ruby, or perhaps maroon, lips.

"What kept you?"

There's purpose in determination
In following past the pain of memory
We would not have made it out of winter without our steel
But here in the dark slate
The grey decay
And black night
Here we know we aren't going to be seen
We must know what we will never leave
Our niche little corner
Industrial and dull
Forever

—Elegy for the Disparate, Verse Two, 22/3/9/4.2/Acorn

Part Two
The Woman Named Anthea, the Idiots, Debbie Reynolds, the Matter of a Perceived Conclusion, and a Memory of Pain

Duh dah da duh. The opening guitar riff sears with strumming electricity. The barflies quaff back their drinks, grunting out the tune. The bar is wood, as some bars are, and covered with little bar things, framed portraits of past events, little in-jokes that only the barflies know. Receipts. Joking signs at each seat that flip into one of two positions: *Have Beer* or *Need Beer*. Singing fish placards. A 3 dollar bill hangs from a fishhook on the wall. Little wood flags of painted patriotism. It's one of the bars you've seen before. And the music plays on: *Duh ah dah duh. B-b-b-bowwww.*

The door is open. The bell rings with the swing of the door, and in steps a confident foot in battered boots, followed by a leg, and then the rest of her. `

Heads turn to look.

June is in the bar. She strides, like she's meant to be there. Her shirt is seared with burns. Her hair is frazzled. Blood is on her lip. She looks like a final girl who's just knocked out Ghostface with a pizza oven tray. She breathes heavily.

"What's your poison?" the bartender asks, somewhat generically.

He's a lean, scratchy-looking man with dark skin. A silver fox. He has small, glinting eyes, hidden behind opaque square glasses, and thick jowls despite his gaunt face.

"Something strong," June mutters. Her eyeliner is dripping. It interests the bartender — he didn't think she was the type to wear eyeliner.

No, not the bartender — the Bartender. Somehow he seems to warrant the capital letter; he's enough of an archetype. But he does have a name; it's Terrance. Not that he has a *last* name. Most people around here don't — even if that makes them dreadfully hard to refer to with any real specificity.

He has been here for very long. He knows when someone is hurt — and not just physically, that's just something you can see with your eyes. But Terrance knows. Terrance has learned a lot of things about being a bartender over the years, and it isn't just the cliché. One shouldn't press. But…

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"How can you ever be sure?" she asks, flirtatiously raising an eyebrow. It almost doesn't seem like she heard him.

He passes her a drink, like she asked. Shot of Tequila. The men at the end of the bar, predominantly white bearded, are looking at her, even old Wrinkler — haven't they ever heard of the words 'age gap'? Terrance hates Wrinkler, who's even older than *him* and even though Wrinkler is here every night, he has not grown accustomed. Having a conversation with Wrinkler is like having a conversation with *sepia.*

On the other side of the room, almost segregated, are a group of Bachelorettes who huddle like penguins for heat which could probably be more easily obtained if they wore clothes that wouldn't make a Victorian faint. But at least they're happy. They chitter and chirp quotations from *Mean Girls*, and their joy radiates through the room, something that June feels unfamiliar with. June wonders why they dress like that. She thinks it's gross.

And on his own, in the corner, there's mild little Todd. *He* is having tea, and doing Sudoku.

But all of them are looking at June right now.

June takes the shot, gingerly at first, and throws it back. Some of it dribbles down her chin. And she stares, directly at Terrance. At first, he had seen someone entirely different walking through the door, a woman in trouble. But this is not what he thought it was. She is not in danger here.

The televisions, thin screens on the rail above them, showing commercials for films and products galore, emit a low buzz. Thick swinging classic rock is pouring from the speakers, from the musicians. You cannot hear the television. You can only hear the oppressive beat, the slow lick, the *Bad to the Bone,* the *Love in an Elevator.*

"What kind are you?" he tries to ask privately, so as not to offend. "Gazpacho? Joe? Laundromat?"

"I suppose I'm always myself, really," she says.

Terrance laughs. No one's *always* themselves these days.

The guitar riff is *going off*. It's fabulous. June reminds herself to congratulate the musician shortly. But for now, she sits by the bar, thinking about how she isn't plastered enough. In the corner, people are gossiping. "Who is she?" "Is she one of the idiots?" "Gotta be a CVS baby." "Sharine, maybe." "Nah, CVS!"

June doesn't hear. She's swaying, hypnotised by the music. You can hear it swing, feel the air shake from the speakers. The air is loud. She can't think of hearing loud air before.

June is no longer looking at Terrance. She is looking at one of the screens, showing an ad for a legacy sequel to a film or show that was once popular a long time ago. Terrance is not sure of the name of the show, but he remembers the faces of the actors. They're all back, minus the ones who died young. And they all look so old now. But you can't help but feel a little excited, nonetheless. Maybe it's psychological, he figures. The low buzz continues.

I want it —

— she says.

Terrance does not say a word at first. He considers asking why she wants it. Maybe she's a fan. But it's none of his business, really. He takes an empty abandoned glass from the other end of the bar counter, and begins to polish it with a yellowed rag steeped in soap. But then he notices, as June is swaying to the old tune. June's hand — this girl's hand, it is completely gone. Not like there's a stump, or a prosthetic, but there is nothing but a bloodied nib of a bone at the end of her arm.

Her eyes flare. She moves like lightning, and then her other hand is on his throat.

* * *

The parking lot. Grey, blah, uninteresting, monotonous. *Big Gazpacho's Motel / Motorlodge,* a place of frustration, stagnation, pain, repetition, and pain. Next to it, another sign. *Welcome to Avenue.* In the parking lot, June is standing. She has just been through hell, or at least a purgatory of sorts. And in front of her is, of course, Anthea, *the woman.* She looks almost mythical in the dull greys of the pebble strewn parking lot, the dark sky. Or she would, if everything wasn't so grey, black, shades of shadow. Which is decisively not fairytale-ish. No, it's the folly of abandonment. But that sounds pretentious.

"What kept you?" was the question Anthea had asked her, leaning aside a grey windowless van. And then, the conversion.

June was in the car. She wasn't sure why she had got in. It was a grungy sort of thing, with a rough black plasticky floor with ridges. There was an abundance of room — this was perhaps the point of having a van, maybe, but instead of useful things for the car, the only furnishings really were the front seats, a few dirtied and yellowed cushions and an old fashioned looking modem. It was an odd car. Its passengers were odder. There was no one but Anthea and a strange teenager, dressed fashionably in shades of beige and brown that showed off their skin. June felt horribly racist, but she had no clue what ethnicity this girl was. Which wouldn't matter, but June wanted to be correct, to show she cared, and knowing what she was like, she'd probably say something wrong later, like she always did. But it was weird to ask.

"What kept you?" Anthea repeated. She was in the front seat, the driver's seat, next to the silent mousy-looking girl.

"Yo," the girl muttered — apparently a greeting.

June had never known, really, how to respond to a question like that. I mean, what was one meant to say? *Oh, yes, well, after several days of staring into the abyss and re-experiencing traumatic memories, I faced down my evil polyethylene film tape double in single combat and placed her non-linear torn off hand into a time fridge.* It didn't exactly roll off the tongue.

"I'm fine, how about you?" she tried.

Anthea smirked. It was a knowing smirk.

Anthea continued to finger her cigarette, thinking mainly about the dopamine and lung cancer it was giving her. She breathed it in. *God, yes.* Serene. She then dropped it suddenly, stuffing out the stub on her heel, grinding it into the increasingly worse looking van floor.

"Can't stand the things," she said, in a completely different tone of voice. June couldn't help but feel surprised. She was practically making out with it a few seconds before.

The girl next to her looked at Anthea, seemingly mad as hell that Anthea had been smoking inside the car. But she didn't say anything. Anthea had dominated the conversation. Anthea leaned into the back seat, twisting over backwards a bit, and extended a hand.

"It's good to meet you," Anthea said. June nervously shook the hand before she promptly pulled it away. "I assume, given the fact that you're one of the few to have escaped, you dealt with the cacophony well enough. Congratulations."

June awkwardly rolled back her lips into a line. "Yeah, um, I have questions."

"Good," Anthea answered smartly. "The best people do. I apologise for not being able to be clearer with you, but there is purpose in the abstract." She smiled, as if to say more — and did not. Only when it was clear that she could have said something just there, and had chosen not to, did she speak again. "Self-governance is the thing," she enunciated.

June could see Anthea's way of speaking, the way she carried herself — she could watch it all twist in real-time. It wasn't like a multiple-personality thing, they were all recognisably similar, but Anthea certainly came across as thoroughly indecisive. Not in what she did, but who she was. She was still making up her mind.

But there they were, June was in the car for whatever reason, and she was apparently going to go somewhere. With strangers. June mindlessly bit at her thumb.

The key in the ignition turned, and the van began to wheel into the absent highway. Outside of the parking lot's greys, the ill-maintained highway — were those weeds over there, at the edge of the crumbling pavement? The world was *pitch* black. Like a desert night. The trees at the edge of the road hung ominously, like great spectres, *Scooby Doo* trees, wailing and weeping in the silent breeze.

* * *

When June was young, she once read a children's book called *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler* — a book which hardly had anything to do with Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler; she only really showed up at the end. Regardless, it was a formative little piece of media for little June. Not that she read very often. She never had the time. It took her months to get through it, and a fair bit of prodding from her middle school English teacher — but it had been worth it, probably.

It was a book about running away. And it really wasn't too scandalous, but she hid it under her bed covers when she took it home from school for fear of it being found anyway. That book was really where the notion of all of it began.

The idea of running away.

The book would go on to posit the correct moral of how running away was really an entirely poor thing to do for actual children. Despite this, it was ultimately a whimsical little story about children living in museums in a sweet saccharine way. It was a good book, but morally confusing. And yet, in a reverse psychology sort of way, the idea was planted.

Of course, the book said stuff about a girl named Claudia and how, if one was really to run away, they had to run *to* somewhere instead of away from somewhere.

So June had decided to do what Claudia had done, to run away, nice and properly, now that she was on her own. To run *to* somewhere. The childish whimsy of it could perhaps distract from the memories of her mother, just a bit, surely. At least she'd hoped so.

Claudia had run to a museum — the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The museum in June's State was no Metropolitan Museum of Art, but she thought she would give it the old college try or whatever it was people said.

She made sure she had enough money to get to the museum, and when the time came, she stowed away in the bathroom stall, just as Claudia did, being sure to hold up her legs so the security guard checking the bathrooms wouldn't be able to see her feet; wouldn't know she was there.

Which was all well and good, but she, being of adult age, was much larger than Claudia, and the guard investigating the bathroom, a Latin-American woman who looked depressed from too long a shift, yelled out a warning and then proceeded to open each and every one of the stalls.

"You read the goddamn book, didn't you?" the guard had sighed, opening June's stall. It was an almost automatic statement. For a moment, there was total silence as the guard took in June's not-ten year-old face, and stared at her, a little confused.

June felt horribly embarrassed, and got a lecture that *technically* attempting to live in a museum was a crime or something, and she should know better, and thank God she got let off with a warning.

That was the first time June had trouble being homeless.

* * *

Simon and Garfunkel tinkled in on the car's shitty radio. It was *Scarborough Fair*, but looking into the bleak night, June couldn't help but think of absence,

and she forgot that she was listening to music at all after a while. The blackness was simply total. June remembered the road trip to the desert, when she was young, and how looking into the desert sky was like looking into nothing, like a fog bank but at night.

Oh, but none of that seemed to stop Anthea in the least.

The motor purred, as Anthea turned again down the road, which was long. After a while, you could really only see the yellow repetition of dotted lines pass by as a way to measure distance. June was straining her neck to see where they were going, as she wasn't in the front seat like Anthea and the girl, and there were no windows in the grey windowless van. Hence the word windowless. The sage music did not help to make this place feel familiar in the latest — it was the very picture of urban decay. They passed a rusted remnant of a playground at the side of the road. Children would have played on it once — now it was only liable to give them tetanus.

The burden of the silence was apparently too much to bear.

"Why's she here?" asked the mousy-looking girl — 17, on the younger side of 18, maybe. Her skin was a pale brown June couldn't quite place, and her clothes were mostly grey with spots of dark brown that matched her hair. She looked annoyed. It was probably the goth eyeshadow. June was surprised by the soft delicacy of her voice, which didn't entirely portend with the way she presented herself.

"She's in the car," came Anthea's reply, turning the wheel down the road. Whilst June felt entirely alienated by Anthea's non-answers, the girl seemed used to them, and even perked up as if she had just been given new information somehow.

Regardless, this new information seemed to push her forward. "I just wanna know *why* she's in the car," the girl said. "It's weird she's in the car." The girl twiddled her thumbs, then tapped her foot. "Is there a *reason* she's in the car?"

"I don't actually know, really," June offered, trying to defuse the situation with good humour. It was only after the words left her mouth that she realised she'd quite like an actual answer from Anthea, herself.

For good or ill, her contribution seemed to be ignored.

"She's important, perhaps," Anthea said, suddenly rummaging through the glove compartment. "It doesn't do to get rid of perhaps-important people."

"She's a Gazpacho," the girl said. "She could be dangerous. No offence," she added, despite this most definitely sounding quite a bit offensive.

June opened her mouth to say that no, she *wasn't* a Gazpacho, her last name was… was… Shit, why couldn't she remember her last name? It was the lamest and perhaps largest brainfart she could think of.

"Last names are the first to go," the girl said to her, her eyes full of sympathy, for the first time showing a bit of sympathy rather than complaint.

June nearly had another existential crisis, but there had been too many today, so she put the thought in the increasingly large 'to cry about later' bin. She tried to lean forward to look out the window, but she couldn't see anything but the shitty street lamp yellow lights. They were quite dim, and nearly a bit dramatic, but not quite.

June snatched the opportunity. "What's your name?"

"Serena," she muttered, leaving a pause for where the last name would have been. "Taj Curry Express," she added. More confusion. June was ready to just assume it was an inexplicable statement, yet another ephemeral riddle, never to be solved — but Serena actually elaborated: "You showed up in a motel, I found myself up in like, an Indian Curry place."

"So… Serena *Taj,"* June supposed.

"June *Gazpacho,*" Serena hissed. "Don't try and make them you. It doesn't end well."

The car, and awkwardness, rode on. It was a *thick* awkwardness. Like awkward pea soup. Anthea jumped in, eventually.

"Personally," Anthea purred, "I think doing that makes things a lot simpler. Certainly a lot more convenient to call you Serena Taj instead of Serena No Idea What Your Last Name Is."

"Oh yeah??" Serena said, getting a little full of herself now. "Where *you* from? What's *your* last name then?"

"My dear, I never lost mine. I'm not so careless." Anthea flashed another of her crimson lipstick smirks. They were getting remarkably typical.

June leaned back into the seat as the road went by. She began to hear again, what Anthea had described as an aria. That was what they were called, right? Those spiralling voices, the voices of… of everyone. If you strained with your ears and squinted with your eyes, you could hear your elementary school bus driver and that slimy man who'd tried to approach you at the last concert and the women and men recording the voice for the New York Subway.

She could almost feel used to them, and it had only been a few hours. Almost like they'd always been there.

And yet, the voices she heard in the motel — they weren't quite right anymore. Not like the motel's wrongness, but their sudden silent presence wasn't close to right either. It was a little more right, sometimes, and then it would go back, like it was teasing.

Something was decidedly not right, and not just because of the blood, which June had just noticed, dripping down from her nose in deep thick glops.

* * *

June was somewhere else now. She'd been flung somewhere… *loud*. The noise was at once soft and thunderous, like huge waves lapping on a beach. Was it a beach? Whatever. *Everywhere's a beach eventually.*

Actually, entropy didn't seem to be the order of the day. There was construction going on, over on the other side of the road. Yet the yellow rust of the crane lifting a girder was metallic in a diseased sort of way, wrong to look at, the brown spots looking like a bruised banana. The ground was a special dark grey of desolation.

It was ?? a construction beach?? No there's no water it's not a beach why do you think it's a beach

Her thoughts ached. How had she…?

June looked down, wondering why her arms ached too.

Ah.

She was dragging someone on the ground, someone she'd never seen before. Had — *had she hurt someone?*

Why wasn't it over? What was going on?

"Please," the *someone* on the ground blurted out. He was a grunting and growling man whose voice peaked at the end of his words, like a microphone giving out. "Please," he repeated, pathetically, and still not specifying what he was pleading for. He was being dragged by his shirt collar, which was riding up, showing his hairy, rotund belly. "I'll do anything!!"

It was around this point June realised this was no dream — and whoever this was, they were begging for their life.

"It's okay!" June said, trying to let go. "I'm not gonna hurt you, you're gonna be safe!"

The reassuring words were reinforced by the swing of her fist into his jaw. She yelped as the man cowered at (*her?*) strike. She had not done this. She didn't want to — *who was this poor man??*

"SORRY!!" June yelled, herself sounding a little pathetic.

She swung again, and again, and the man's face was starting to splatter onto her — well, it wasn't her fist, it was a — it was a stump! From before! And both of them were crunching into each other. It was *horrible.* Every second there was a little detail, the look in his eyes or something, and it would just catch in her head and she wouldn't stop seeing it still in her mind's eye just going just there just —

And she hoped against hope he was going to be alright, that she would stop, that this was *someone else's fault,* that this confusing day of hers would just

fade away and she would be under a park bench somewhere because surely surely that would be better than watching this man's nose break —

She's crying now and her eyes are getting all bleary and blurry and

* * *

Slowly they refocus. Now they're clear. The teardrops fade.

June's back in the van.

* * *

The car ride was, as most things seemed to be in Avenue, elongated — stretched thin and filled with anxiety-inducing repetition. The little rattles of the van's thin metal walls gave out a slow, almost imperceptible rhythm that was further augmented by the engine's own rattle and purr.

"Is she alright?" Serena asked.

She was in the front seat still, but there was someone in the back with her. They were looming over her, but that was because she was lying on the seat — whoever it was, they weren't very tall. And they looked exceedingly gay — both in the modern sense, because they looked, well, let's face it, *really gay*, and in the way that an old Victorian novel might intend it, because they also genuinely looked incredibly cheerful.

It wasn't just their expression — though they were grinning, to be sure — but an aura of cheer which clung to them. Perhaps because, in this shady black-and-white world, everything on them was so *bright*.

Their turquoise hair shone. Pins on their searing red jacket announced proudly that they were bisexual, and that they used they/them and he/him pronouns; there were two other pride flags that June had absolutely no fucking clue about. Good for them, she supposed? Also next to these pins was a proudly-presented name tag, pilfered from some store called *Heathborough's,* upon it what she presumed to be this embodiment of good cheer's name had been messily scrawled in blue sharpie — **WICK**, it said in slightly-stained, but very neat strokes. Their legs were wrapped in a blanket which clashed horribly with the jacket.

"I don't know," the artist apparently known as Wick said, shining a flashlight in June's eyes. "I don't *know* if she's alright."

She winced, not just because the light shone in her eyes, but because through the roof of the van's ceiling, up through the night sky and across the reflection of the moon, she could see a meagre, but omnipresent blast of the Sun.

"Helloo!?" Wick said, a little too loudly, as if she was a great distance away. To be fair, she was. "Anthea, I think I've woken her up!"

They were so *young*! June was young herself, a sprightly 26, but for all that, she couldn't help but feel completely disassociated from Serena and Wick. To be sure, they were quite close in age, really, from a, you know, cosmic sort of perspective, but she couldn't help but feel oceans away from these two *kids*.

June tried to drag herself upward from her current position, lying prone — but she wasn't moving. Her head was burning — no, it felt like it was ricocheting side to side — and yet not moving at all. *Chrono-Political Conflict,* her head said. *The Aftermath. Archonal Dissonance. Great Cosmic Shrapnel.* Shut up, head. Her eyes were open, at least, and Wick was actually pulling her back from the edge, just a bit.

"Yes! You're alive!"

"…Y…yeah?…" She hadn't meant to sound interrogative.

"You suddenly went unconscious," Wick explained. "People don't tend to do that, even here. Uhm. Hi! My name is Wick! I use they/them pronouns, mostly, but you can also use 'he' so long as you don't call me a man!" He blinked. "Please tell me you're okay."

June didn't hear this, not really — she sort of half-heard it, actually, because she kept hearing this great deep sing-growl from up in the sky, like an electrical fan. "There's a part of me in the other me," she muttered esoterically. "But there isn't an *other* me…"

"She's delirious," Wick said to Anthea, immediately, without the sightest hesitation.

Anthea kept her eyes on the road, but if any of them had seen her face, they would have noticed the steely comprehension in her furrowed brow.

June didn't try. Her head was too busy starting to put its pieces back together. She tried to say something to Wick, an 'oh yes, nice to meet you' or something. Instead, she nearly threw up. Her head was spinning. Something was in her skull. And she couldn't get any words out, because Wick began to babble to her about something or other. So blunt, so fast —

In her delirium, she became introspective. *Blunt. Fast.* People had fast lives now. Every second was just going, she was just going, everything was happening and her head hurt like the slow ring of a gong. *She's going she's going she's going*

Constant new information, constant education, constant new things to be angry about that June really didn't know how to keep up with. Why weren't things simple like when she was young? When was that?

And then, with that dark, sedate dark road road… something… in front of her, bleary through heavy eyelids, she realised that despite it having become much, much stranger, she didn't have a *fast* life anymore either. She was lurching. She was stumbling. Ow. She was, she is, she was… No, she had to get those tenses under control. Down, you alley cats.

Her problem, she realised, was simple. She was focused on a good thing to focus on — at the wrong time. Again. With the way her head was, it couldn't stop.

She looked at Wick's tags and tried to remember all the pronouns, programming them into her head. It always took her so much effort, she hardly knew anything about this stuff and her mom would always get so mad whenever she tried to learn. She didn't want to mess up. She messed up things a lot. She was probably going to mess things up… She didn't want to, but she probably would. . .

The road was long, and showed no signs of stopping. Neither did the ringing in her head. "I… I didn't beat the other me in the motel, I think." She forced out through gritted teeth, although it was difficult.

Anthea nodded silently. *Shit,* she already knew? June hated to be the last one to know anything.

Anthea's smooth jazz voice calmly stated the obvious. "You smashed it with a television, dear, but it *came* from a VHS tape. That's like trying to kill a housefly with faeces."

As she slipped deeper and deeper back into unconsciousness, June realised where they were going, well, not *where*, but *who*.

Somehow — somehow, they were going after it. They were chasing the other *her*. They were chasing *her*.

* * *

Is she seeing things? Probably seeing things. Seeing things as in the sense of seeing things other people aren't seeing because well like most people see

the way most people see without thinking about it you know ugh you're getting all spacy stop it

The longroad stretched out ahead of them some more. Perhaps it had to do with the folding of space — *what?* — but perhaps the longroad was simply a long road. Strange name if so, almost redundant. But then again, she doubted it had anything to do with the folding of space. She probably made it up. Why would she do that?

June was still unconscious. Still listening to things that weren't being said.

"The forces of stagnation are infinite, probably," Anthea stated, eventually, as they turned down the longroad once more.

There were no turns on the path, and there were many, resulting in a curved zig zag which Anthea steered through exceptionally well and exceptionally quickly.

"We all think that the world is governed by human nature, transformed by our own collective choice — the way the environment deteriorates, the business expands; but really this only occurs because it is in the open, in the certain place. Deep down, very little changes. Deep down, there are always

the still places, like our Avenue, where you can see how the rot from the stagnation has taken hold."

Anthea hadn't said that. No one had. The entire thing was made of a lack of existence. Instead, Anthea sighed as they went down the road. Serena hummed *Bad Guy*, but didn't make any noise. Was it stuck in her head? Wick silently fiddled with their fingers. It was so difficult to keep still.

The delirium wasn't outside her like in the motel room, she wasn't in a strange place — it was just in her head, and she was slipping. She was imagining a world. Oily and slick.

But the world was there.

The grime, and the rebar, and the cement, and the broken glass.

Wick watched her with worried eyes, and the road went on. That's all it ever did.

* * *

"How deep is she going?" Wick asks, out loud, truly, physically.

Anthea doesn't answer.

* * *

june's seeing red drip but it isn't blood it's just red like a colour, like blue, you know, how blue and green and stuff is a colour well she's seeing the red drip and not from a person but from the ground

you'd think it'd pool on the ground but no it's like it's a bird and it's falling upward what's that word

yeah the red's dripping towards the sky in great *big* globs, out of these deep ember cracks in the ground

oh boy

* * *

"June, June, pay attention to me," Wick says. She's too far gone to wrestle with the sense; present it is, that's all she has spoons for right now. They tap

her forehead, then a gentle slap to get her to pay attention, to come to. It's half-hearted, like Wick's trying to slap her but can't quite convince himself to.

"Mhmwh…?…" To write out her mumbled, keening noise, as though it were a word, is perhaps to give it too much credit. But Wick is generous, and treats it like a question.

"We're nearing the end of the road," they reply.

Her head is starting to clear. It's not fully clear. She still can't move. But she whispers out a sentence, through her gritted teeth. It's like being at the dentist.

"What's happening to me?"

"Residue," Anthea says, coldly. "Are you very spiritual?"

She considers — finds that she has the presence of mind to consider, to dwell, to answer the question *after* it's been asked. Time is back… was back. Good, that was something.

Ignoring the stilted absurdity of the sentence, which sounded once again like another of her hallucinations. June thought about God for a moment, and whether she believed in Him. She came to a conclusion relatively quickly. And honestly, it wasn't something she had thought about concretely before. It was always there — "like a comforting blanket, you know" — as stupid as it might be to compare God to a blanket. Yes, she believed in God.

"Yeah," she said eventually.

"It is about belief," Anthea noted. "You are a receptacle. This is unusual. Most people trapped here believe in very few things indeed."

Fear set into June's heart. "I'm trapped here?"

"Yes," Anthea said, and as the van stopped, Anthea stood elegantly, her black-cocktail dress shining. It was a fluid motion, over before June could comprehend it — she hadn't visibly *gotten out of the car.* Anthea was simply standing in the parking lot, the car door in her hand. It was… disorienting. June had hardly heard the engine stop.

But she wasn't paying attention to that. She was paying attention to what she felt she'd already known, somehow. She was trapped here, wherever here was. She was far from home, and she would never get closer. Because wasn't that what the word 'trapped' meant? It was indefinite. It was such a hopeless word.

* * *

Across the small parking lot, there was a bar called *Insolence,* which June thought was remarkably heavy-handed of the owner.

The bar was in a state of deep disrepair. June had not been in a bar before, or at least, not to drink. Of course, there had been a few restaurants she'd been to that happened to include bars. But a bar for a bar's sake was a different matter entirely. She didn't want to go to one. She had seen what that had done to her mother, for the first thing. And Father Thomas at the Church had always told her that they were places of vice and sin.

But she *knew* that this wasn't what bars happened to look like. I mean, most of it looked right, but then there were the floundering, splintery bits of broken wood, like tumours. Violence had taken place here. She had *hurt* people. The guilt was a remarkably strong feeling.

"This is where we meet up and stuff, usually," Wick explained, seeming a bit forlorn, looking at the broken walls — then, embarrassed. "I mean, to work. There's um, there's a back room that they loan out."

June nodded to show she heard them. She didn't know what to say to anything right now.

Serena lugged a man in a chequered plaid shirt to his feet, lumping him like a ragdoll in a chair. Her being so small, it was an amusing image. June noticed there were a few men on the floor, and some girls too.

Anthea was looking behind the counter. She silently — as if it was what she was meant to do, and she wasn't breaking any rules — removed a bottle of wine and delicately poured some into a glass — much fancier, she noticed, than any of the mugs proffered by the other unconscious drinkers.

If she was here before, June thought, and she attacked people — why would she do that? It didn't seem like something she'd do at all. And how'd the other her get here? "Why this place?" she asked herself.

Anthea, holding the glass of wine now, announced: "Something has taken the owner. Old Terrance wouldn't dare let me into his fine Sauvignon if he was conscious and within the establishment."

Serena muttered a quiet "Real." in agreement.

Wick began to explore the bar. They looked at the splinters. The jukebox was missing. The backroom — where they usually worked — seemed to be untouched. There was… there was something odd to all this.

Why had she been here before? June's thoughts raced. Nothing about this made logical sense. Still nothing felt right. She just wanted to feel like she was on solid ground, that she knew the decisions she was making were correct. But she was quite literally split on the matter. A part of her was in the other her… and she hoped that it wasn't vice versa as well. She began to chew greedily on her fingers. She didn't notice she was doing it.

"Todd!" Serena exclaimed, her dour demeanour instantly lost. She rushed over to one of the bodies, whose face was bloodied, and exhaled loudly when she realised he was still alive.

Small town, I guess, June thought. Everyone knew everyone. But it was odd to see someone her age and disposition so intently worried about a 44-year-old man. Todd must have been a good one. No, not *must have been*, *must be*. He was fine, he was going to be fine. He had to be fine.

"Why this place?" she asked, vocalising the question that had been eating at her. "Why'd the me-thing come here? How'd she outrun us?"

She could feel the anger of the act. The need. Like half a memory, when you were upset about something but aren't sure what. There's a low buzz in the air.

I want it.

The anger in her chest was eating away at her. They all thought of her like she was nothing. Looked at her like she was a fragile little girl.

She wasn't… she's not a fragile little girl. She's not a — she's not a — the anger is so strong, this rage, and you know, it's weird, it actually does feel like burning rage, it's not an analogy that she's felt before, but that is actually what it feels like, like fire in the chasm of her stomach, but entirely different from indigestion. She tries to avoid the feeling. But she wants to break something, somehow.

She reaches up… *reached up* to the television laid above the bar. A boxy, squat thing. Mid-90s, perhaps? She felt drawn to it. She'd only had televisions like this for a short time — before they became flat screens, and all that. But there was surely something about them…

"The jukebox…" Wick murmured. "The jukebox is missing. Oldest thing in the building."

"Nostalgic," Serena nodded. "People feel like they know those things even if they didn't grow up with them."

June continued to stare at the television. In a way, it was nostalgic too, wasn't it? Yes, that was the word, nostalgic. The black screen reflected her face, but the reflection didn't quite match her. The face was dirtied and burnt, with little, precisely-placed cuts. It wasn't a reflection, it was — it was the other her, and her eyes were pale and deep. And she was frightened! They were both so frightened, and it was — it was feeding into her and —

"Put it down!" Serena yelled all of a sudden, and June dropped the boxy television. Serena rushed over, and in a single deft movement, picked it up and threw it into the wall, where it shattered. The boxy remains fell to the ground. Shards of glass spread. Wires exposed.

"She knows we're onto her," Wick said, intently.

They're so professional, so direct, and it's hard to believe they were the same nerdy geek who'd been rambling in the van, about science and pronouns and the transvergence peripheral of the localised chronitron emissions.

June was biting her lip.

* * *

Blood is dripping down from the lip, from her lip, as June drags the second body alongside the curb. Her hand is missing, and it aches black and green.

Terrance is unconscious in her hands, his dark face is smeared like a portrait, and they're walking down the sidewalk, dragging down the sidewalk, but she's strong, she can do it, she can do what the haunts want of her.

Move. Walk. Step with your feet. Drag. Keep pushing. Down the street, here we go.

She worries there will be smears on the pavement. Is she dripping? No?

Well, it will all work out, because it has to, because that's the way it always has so far, and June, in whatever form, isn't one to give up.

June doesn't feel right, though, and it's not just the hand, and it's not just the need, it's not just the *I want it* it's not the old, it's this *thing* in her chest, beating, but it's not her heart, it's this push of adrenaline that isn't her own, it's this agonising feeling of upbeat something-or-other.

I want it

I want the old because it's better because it wasn't now I want the old and not the new I want to be a thing again I want to not know. I want.

There's a jukebox in the junkyard and a record store nearby and a comic shop that's filled with dust like winter snow and you have to pay but I don't want to pay I want to eat it up I'm not full yet and I want it I want it I want

But I mean, that's always there. She's always thinking that, isn't she?

She doesn't want to hurt anyone. Why would she want to hurt anyone, why poor Terrance? Why *did* she have to kill that other man… She's no killer, she believes in God, and she knows that even if it wasn't a sin it would still be simply *awful*, it would be a really bad thing to do.

Is she the good June or the bad June?

She drags Terrance's body. She drags the body.

* * *

Back in the bar. Back in *Insolence,* and what a strange bar it is, all this nice teak wood and it's so glossy and it's fancy but also it's broken and it's got all this dirt and shit and black ink spewed all over it.

"She's on the street," June says. "She's on the street outside… she went through the back door, through the back lot and then she went electric."

Anthea nods. June isn't surprised that Anthea nods. It's straightforward, and Anthea is either blunt or cryptic. Though really, Wick, Serena and Anthea are all pretty blunt, for different reasons, probably.

June is thinking about what she's saying, what's coming out of her mouth, that the other one went electric, and she's thinking it makes zero sense, and how it's not a very *her* thing to say, she's been the one asking questions all day, she's been the one…

"C'mon," Serena mutters, grabbing a splintered board of wood from the floor, and she begins to rush out the door. It's impulsive and fast. Probably a little too daring. But June doesn't know that, she doesn't know crap. She's still so confused, and in a bit of a frozen state. There's a record spinning in her chest, she's a metaphorical record player and it's skipping.

S-S-sS-Saturday Night's All-All-All

It's fine, it's immaterial. She moves her feet. Enough of this confusion. She's going to be decisive. She moves after Serena, and Wick nervously follows.

Anthea, the slow knife, is still.

* * *

The other June isn't too hard to find, Serena thinks, as she huffs and puffs her way along the street, following the little flecks on the curb that a lesser hunter wouldn't be able to see.

Whom does the other June hold captive? Who is it?

On the side of the road, in a pile of rubbish the first trail ends. She recognises the flabby body.

Wrinkler. Old stupid barfly, obnoxious, and certainly stuck in his ways. But old people can be stubborn like that… was Wrinkler his name? Was it just a nickname, the way your name fades here? Serena had heard of people needing new ones after a while.

She thinks about Wrinkler and his broken face. His old face. There are other old things near his body. Broken CD. Dusty Atari game with an alien on it. Little stone cherub statuette. Mossy cinder block. Typewriter. Ironing board. Teapot. Rusty scissors. An antique fan. It's a veritable *I Spy* picture. Like some sort of perturbed shrine to what was.

Wrinkler was the oldest fellow in the diner, wasn't he? …Who was the second oldest? Bad ideas swarm through Serena's skull.

His misty eyes stare up at her. She cannot meet them. She reaches down, and pushes poor Wrinkler's eyelids shut.

* * *

There is a great love to be found in being purposefully aimless, a wanderer in the present tense, if one is self assured. Eternal wandering bears little point, if one cannot be at home anywhere — which was probably what the past tense was for; welcome back. Yet June was not entirely aware of this, however frequently it had been repeated to her the people she met on her travels, and however clearly the notion was expressed in that well-worn, much-misinterpreted copy of *Basil E. Frankweiler* which nested in her backpack. The museum was not the only time June had trouble being homeless, but it was certainly the most embarrassing, and probably the one she'd remember most.

It was around a week or two later, and after an interrogation for the grand crime of 'being homeless'" by some officer person when she was found underneath a park bench, that she began to realise that perhaps this whole thing was a horrible idea. Nor did that happen just the once.

But these logical aphorisms held little sway with June in the midst of fear. Fear, as one of her pithy little textbooks had told her, meant to fuck everything and run. This was a direct quotation from something called *The Actor's Playbook*, a thin publication that had essentially been an impulse read during one of her *phases*. June was never much of an actor, and had not gotten that much from it, but she remembered its pointed questions about the adversity of being seen, and felt amenable to it at the least.

Eventually, she halfway managed to pick herself up. June had been in an ill state, from odd job to odd job, trailing awkwardly about the state on a bicycle with her bag. Food was the chief consideration, and indeed, there *were* times she went hungry, but being resourceful, these were rather far between.

It wasn't quite as difficult as she had thought it would be; she assumed the streets would be bitter and vile places, and yes, they were, but the demons she had predicted in her mind were more villainous than the actual truth of the matter, which was uncomfortable and at times severely pained, but not as of yet life threatening.

She found herself meeting the people of the streets. She did not know their names. She couldn't ask. There was too much disappointment in the air.

There was a particular man she saw regularly, a bald, dignified-looking sort with stubble along his cheeks, the white flecks of a former beard — he hadn't shaved well, so there were little knots of rough remaining. He had thick eyebrows. You might say he looked Polish, but no, he was American. Of course, June personally subscribed to the thought that all one needs to be American is to say it — mostly because it pissed her mother off — but that man, he dressed like a C.I.A. agent in winter. (Which he wasn't.) He had a big damn black overcoat, with a thin, tassel-covered, light-grey scarf hanging over it. Plus sunglasses. Because of course. He had creases around his mouth, the beginning of jowls.

One day, he'd decided to speak to her for once, and he'd talked about his old wife, and how much he'd missed her since she'd left him — for what? Really unclear. But eventually, he had uttered immortal words.

"You should go to Avenue," he'd said taking a slow puff from a cigarette, one of the many into which he'd taken to translating his wages. "It is the place for you."

Avenue? She'd never heard of it. "Where's that?"

"Close," he'd mumbled, and even his mumbles would *boom*, because his voice was such a deep baritone. He'd lit a new cigarette, the final one in his box. So he dropped it to the ground — the box, not the cig — grinding it into the damp and dirty pavement with his foot, into the mud and silt. The crunched cigarette case in the rain-puddle had *stuck* in her brain.

Then he'd looked up into the middle distance. There was something forlorn in his eyes as he held the cigarette to his lips. Little wisps billowed. He had a twinkle in his eye, like a storyteller, like Santa Claus. But it faded as he continued to puff.

She'd known him for about half a week now, and she didn't know anything about him other than his physicality, his presence — the fact that he was *there*. June had never really known-not-known someone like that before.

"Who are you?" she'd asked, then.

"I could be incredibly important," he'd stated, sagely. "Or I could be nobody at all. This is the way of perspective."

June had gently nibbled on her finger. This really wasn't much of an answer, so she'd just hoped that he'd keep on talking. Which he had.

"I could be part of a pantheon, maybe, like a pantheon of little gods… a noble team of scientists … maybe a thing fed by hubris." He had paused, she remembered, thinking about who he could be. Eventually he seems to think of something: "I could be a professional assassin! A bloodhound on the trail of accursed Lilith." June hadn't asked for clarification about this bit. Or the next one. "Or maybe I'm working for her."

Then a long pause.

Eventually:

"I think I might be a Master Librarian from the ancient veils of the Plume Coteries."

Then he'd dismissed even that.

"I'm probably an old man on a street somewhere, off his head and speaking in damn riddles."

"Are you?" June had asked. It seemed important.

And then the man was suddenly *over*. As in, well, *over there*. He had walked away incredibly quickly, without hesitation. Not magic or teleportation. He hadn't disappeared into the mist, or floated up into the heavens, or just blinked from one place to another — he just walked off, as if he was *done*. But so *sharply*.

Avenue. There was something about the possibilities in that word. *Avenue*… like it led somewhere. And she was meant to go somewhere, she'd known that for certain, even back then.

June hadn't followed the man. No, she hadn't followed him at all, she'd never seen him again; or at least not for many years indeed. But it didn't matter.

Because there was something about a town called Avenue.

There *is* something about a town called Avenue.

* * *

June and Wick couldn't keep up with Serena. They tried for a while, but she was too far ahead of them, and they needed to catch their breath. June heaved and wheezed. She'd never been super fit. She was thin, but it was a twig-like sort of skinniness. If you pushed her, she'd snap. She'd been trying to gain weight for a while.

Regardless, here they stood, trying to catch their breath.

Or anyway, that's what June was doing. She'd thought Wick needed the breather as well, at first, but the kid was just sort of jabbering, which seemed antagonistic to the purpose.

"I'm very really sort of sorry you had to like show up at Avenue like this," they began. "Like, I know I shouldn't be sorry about things that I really don't have very much control over, and I mean, usually newcomers do have disconcerting things happen to them but like, they're usually, you know, brief, in length? Did I tell you about when I showed up? It was in the forest, I showed up in the forest, the Elden walking trails… and I just had to walk out of the woods in the middle of the night. That was it, like, no eldritch space demons showed up or anything, and, you know, that was really scary, it was a scary experience, but I mean, it's nothing compared to the VHS tape from Hell you know? Am I annoying you? I'm really sorry if I'm annoying you. You seem to be having a tough day."

June wondered how she hadn't noticed Wick when she'd first climbed into the van with Anthea. *I mean… how could anyone miss them? Them?! Am I blind?*

"Where were you when I got in the van?" June asked, still a little breathless.

"Well, I was there, but you were talking, and I thought it would be rude to interrupt, because I usually interrupt, but Anthea, you know Anthea, well, you don't, you've just met her, but you know Anthea, and she's always saying make a good first impression, so I wanted to say something but then Serena brought up the whole Gazpacho thing and I thought that was a can of worms so I didn't say anything and then I opened my mouth to introduce myself but the silence was so thick and I felt like I would be unnaturally forcing myself into a conversation where I wasn't strictly wanted, like, I mean, at that point, the longer I waited to talk, the more difficult it would be to introduce myself, and you weren't looking at me, so it still wasn't a natural thing to introduce myself then, and I *know* some people think I am loud and overwhelming and so I had like a mini-anxiety moment and thank God you fell unconscious really… but also that was quite scary."

June liked Wick. They were annoying but it was the endearing kind of annoying. And there had been so few normal things going on today that discussing social anxiety was actually deeply nice, in a weird sort of way.

"I don't get stuff either," June said eventually.

Wick nodded intently, and pointed to his jacket. "Pins are helpful!" they said, like a total dweeb. June laughed, for the first time all day.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go find Serena."

* * *

Anthea was still at the bar. She was examining Todd. Todd was very important to Anthea, for reasons she couldn't possibly say, lest people overhear, and spread information. Information was currency. Yes, Todd was important in all of his useless splendour. He wouldn't be helpful, but it is important that the right people be alive, isn't it?

She abandoned him on the stool, and proceeded to move along the bar, one foot at a time. She scowled at the floor. Her shoes were too nice for this place at the best of times, the bar always being exceptionally dirty despite the nice woodwork. She would have to sweep all of this garbage splinter stuff up.

Only so much property in Avenue. Well. Only so much *safe* property in Avenue.

Neither Todd nor the floor were the only reason she was still at the bar, because Anthea was planning, and Anthea wasn't a woman of action — more of a C.E.O. than all this grunt work. She wondered for a moment if a chauffeur could drive the van. But no, *business.*

The back room of the bar, where she conducted her business, she was worried it had been compromised when she saw *Insolence's* state, but it was not touched in the least. None of the valuables (few as they were) had been touched, nor any the paperwork (five sheets, slipshod in a folder).

It was the *bar* that had been assaulted, not her attempt at an organisation. *How fascinating.*

She moved her feet along the wood, and began to waltz. No, not a waltz. Something a bit slower, the three-step pattern wasn't suitable at the moment, she decided. *We shall have to go with four.*

1, 2, 3, 4. The shoes moved smoothly across the wood, with dignity. She, in circles. It had to be subconscious, of course. 1, 2, 3, 4. She did this often. 1, 2, 3, 4. It helped her think. Her hands raised to the invisible partner. 1, 2, 3, 4.

What was different about the room?

What's different about the room?

She smiled, realising it. The old things were gone. Curious. But, she supposed, predictable. Or wasn't it? Well, it wasn't like she hadn't given June all the pieces by now…

Yes, this would be the test.

1, 2, 3, 4.

* * *

Serena is running. Serena is running through moments, one slice of present after the other, never looking back.

She is chasing oblivion. She *knows* that the other June has to be ahead. She can't be far off, especially with Terrance in tow.

Just ahead, just a little more walking.

You can't just appear and disappear if you're lugging a body about. Well, *you* can't appear and disappear, anyway. Plainly this other June has abilities some would consider to be unnatural or… something? The odd and unexplained at least. So maybe — but there's no time to think of that.

Serena feels the heartbeat in her chest. Her very own metronome, moving with her steps. She pushes it down. She pushes everything down. No music right now, no thoughts right now, only the mission, the hunt.

Serena doesn't think for a moment that *the hunt* may be an unusual thing to be thinking about as a seventeen year old, because it is what she knows. These streets raised her; even if she had a home, a long time ago, these streets are her second, and she knows that just beyond the next few buildings, there's an alley that maybe, just maybe, she could manoeuvre the prey into.

The streets are cold and damp, the pavement is crumbly and there are weeds through the sidewalk, craven weeds, all deep and dark green like the darkest forest at night. Stains of water damage on the building's walls nearby, a solitary pipe that once hissed out steam sprays nothing now.

Avenue buildings are usually abandoned, but that makes the noise stronger, that makes the hunt easier. Serena knows the pitter-patter of rats and how they skitter differently than people.

Time passes, and it passes incredibly slowly, as it is known to do in this witching hour. Serena wonders if day will come. It is usually short when it does. Avenue doesn't have much light, just enough to make things washed out and grey for a bit, just revealing a bit more of the granite, before it turns back into the long dark twilight.

The thing about Avenue is there are either no trees or trees are all you see. Either industry pummels them into oblivion, like here, where everything is stone buildings and cobblestone ground and flat burdensome sidewalk and curb or they grow strong and thick over everything, because it's all part of the deep deep forest that surrounds the edge of town.

The running is tedious.

There! Serena spots her quarry. June is trying to drag the still-unconscious Terrance through a building's back door. Is it the abandoned theatre? Serena moves forward, and she removes the shiv that she keeps in a pocket in her too large boots. It's no gun, but there are few of those here, usually claimed by gangs who copy and stockpile them.

Thanks to the muted brown and grey tones of her clothing, she will not be quickly spotted. She moves forward, not *quite* fast enough, and June meets her eyes.

"Are you going to hurt me?" June asks. "Please don't hurt me."

Serena fingers the shiv. "You're dragging a body."

"Yes, but some of the time, I'm here, and some of the time, I'm not," June says.

Serena can't figure whether this is actually June's subconscious or something, or just a trick. She doesn't know June all that well, so a gut response is probably not the best. Besides, all she can really do is threaten her. Actually going at her with the shiv isn't exactly going to be a non-fatal scenario, and Serena figures that if their connection is so strong, both Junes certainly should be alive.

"You're wondering which one I am," June says. "We're each other right now. I'm not a *bad evil clone June*. I'm — I'm a person, and you've got to believe me."

Serena maybe does for a second, but it's fleeting. "You killed Wrinkler."

"That was the other me," she says. "I don't expect you to understand how it works — I mean, I don't."

Serena sees a change in June's eyes. She suddenly looks hungry.

I want it. Serena almost thinks she said it, but she didn't have to.

But it's gone again, and Serena really feels quite unsure. This should be obvious. I mean, there's only one of them in the room right now. But — but what if they *are* connected, just as Anthea theorised?

"Sometimes I'm the bad one, and sometimes I'm not," June explains. "Does that make sense?"

Serena looks at June, and sees her hand, her single hand, holding Terrance by his shirt collar, and the awful bludgeoned stump on her other arm. She looks at Terrance's body.

"Do you like old things?" June asks. Serena doesn't think much of old things. "Do you miss how things were?" This question cuts deeper. "Before Avenue?"

Serena doesn't remember much before Avenue. Before she became Serena Taj to people. Marked by where she showed up, of all things. Isn't that always the way?

"Weren't things better before?" June asks.

The question is open and strange. Serena thinks about the question, she *does* actually think about it — and she subtly takes a step forward, closer, but not *too* close as to frighten June. … She shouldn't think of her as June, it's — it's not as simple as that, but — but her face!

She focuses.

"Before what?" she asks.

June seems confused. Her face contorts a little.

"Before *what,* precisely?" Serena repeats. "People have been shit forever. There's always been wars. Nationalism. Colonialism. Repression, Authority, Conformity." The words ring truer to Serena than she hoped they would. She actually feels passionate about it, and it surprises her, because she really hasn't *felt* much lately. Everything *has* to have been worse before now, she *has* to be making progress.

June has no clue what Serena's talking about, but it's making the feeling in her chest mad. Serena is — she's a *cynical bitch, she — she doesn't get it. She doesn't get it. She doesn't want it. Want it. Want it.*

"How it was," June hisses, and Serena raises the knife, because she really isn't proper-June right now, and — and she doesn't want to hurt her, but she really needs to defend herself. Something is very, very, wrong.

"*We're inside right now!*" June says, panicked.

She slams her blunt arm against the wall —

And suddenly June pushed the air and Serena snapped out of the present, into the past, remembering, remembering everything, everything that *wasn't right now,* from five minutes ago to a day ago to a year ago to ten years ago to the day she was born and it was all in her head and she was remembering every individual second, searching for the day that was better, back when she was happy, and sure, there were moments, but it was too much now, too much all at once, really, because she kept just focusing on the — the — and —

— and she screamed, collapsing to the scattershot pavement. June's face twitched, looking at her with so much fury and resonance and momentum. Her eye was what twitched with anger, a furious little squint. June burned at Serena for a moment, and then turned around, opening the back door.

She dragged Terrance inside.

* * *

It didn't take too long for Wick and June to find Serena behind the building, although they did take a few wrong turns. Luckily, June *knew* where to go, which Wick *would* have found disconcerting if they felt they had had any time to be disconcerted. Time was pressing, June thought, and she really just wanted this whole debacle to be over with, so she could go lie down, because there was this ache, in her head, and in her stomach, but mostly on her hand, on *the* hand, and June wondered and worried if it would just fall off and there would be no telling the two of them apart, but that was entirely irrational. Which didn't exactly stop the worry of it, but was a neat little reminder she could keep putting into her head when the hand pulsed.

Serena's body had no cuts, no wounds, and for all intents and purposes, she looked ostensibly asleep. Her heart beat steadily. June didn't want to *leave* her there, that certainly made very little sense, but, well, there didn't seem to be much else one could do.

Wick moved her over to the nearby wall, something she could lean on — it was more dignified than the street. Wick was back to not saying much again, and June envied that compartmentalization they were capable of — rambling was all well and good, and being professional was all well and good, but June had never managed a balance.

"So, d'ya think the — what should we call her? — do you think *she*'s inside?" Wick asked, and June nodded, absolutely certain of it. She didn't know how to answer the what should we call her question, because she felt that part of her was in the other her and part of the other her was also probably part of her too. Maybe that anger she had been feeling. Was she looking too deep into it?

"You know more about like, this sort of thing, what do you think we should do?" June tried to delegate.

Wick looked at her and sort of shrugged. "I mean, I could try and block off the exits, but I'm more of a fellow-in-the-chair sort of deal than, well, any sort of muscle."

June tried not to hyperventilate. The people who seemed to *do* this sort of thing weren't going to be much help to her. Anthea had vanished, Serena was stone cold unconscious and Wick was just as much a worrywart as she was. This was hopeless, right? The same impudent thoughts had been going in her head on loop all day, and now they were really beginning to look disturbingly validated.

"What's the team you and Anthea are on? What organisation? Can we call for help? What's it called?" June babbled, trying to ask sensible questions.

"They call us idiots, mostly." Wick noted, a little sheepish.

June sighed, against her will. "Can we call the police then?" she asked.

"June, this is *Avenue*," Wick replied, almost apologetic. "Besides — call them with what phone?"

Fair point, she realised. She didn't have her phone in her pocket. Lost at some point, maybe it vanished. Things *had* been vanishing.

She looked at the backdoor. She didn't know this Terrance fellow at all. Maybe she should just let him — no — she does know his face, she knows his face and the wrinkles on his dark skin, because she saw them through her own eyes, through the other eyes, and he didn't do anything wrong at all. *Oh, give it up, June. Nothing you can do about it.*

She hated this feeling of irrelevance. The hopeless feeling of not knowing paintings and the way of motel rooms, as though she was no better than a bit of cardboard being bashed out onto the pavement without a second thought.

Is she about to do something incredibly stupid?

* * *

Once she opens the back door and steps through the thin dark hallway, she is in a crevasse — thin, and with thinner light showing through gaps. This is the backstage of the theatre, dark, and every piece of wood is painted pitch black so the audience doesn't see it. It's where the actors, the crew, lurk, but there's no one here now, so there's just all of this black wood, until she steps back out of the hallway and she's properly backstage, not just in the access hallway. There's room to stand here.

It's not a world of colour, but the texture of everything is thick, industrial. There's metal ladders leading up to a gangway — this was an actual *theatre* before it became just for movies. Based on the faded with dust ornamentation that June's eyes are beginning to see, acclimated to the darkness, it wasa very nice one. Wick has cautiously entered behind her, carrying a knife shiv thing they appropriated from the ground near Serena.

Elegant, tinkling music like raindrops spills through the theatre, *friendly* music, not at all distorted — evocative of early Hollywood, when they'd just begun to talk and sing and all the women and men spoke with those particular curled voices. That rhinestone, twinkling time. It's so round, full and pleasant. Sanitised. Bordering upon the zen.

And here the two of them are, in this dark hollow. Wires hang from the ceiling. Ladders head to nowhere. And the silver screen, that they can now just see behind them, as they step out into the audience, is glowing.

Singing in the Rain is on the huge screen — a black-and-white copy, a little stressed with age. It's the opening credits, the imagine-spot where you see the three stars twirling happily in their bright-looking raincoats. Entirely disconnected from the narrative — it's just to show off the big names, the über-famous, their credits appearing in brash lettering over their heads.

GENE KELLY
DONALD O' CONNOR
DEBBIE REYNOLDS

June's seen the movie plenty of times over the years, and she loves it really, it's one of those… films that remind her of being a kid… She loves the whole thing, the whole movie, except that one weird long dance sequence during *Broadway Melody* where there's no plot and all the actors are just showing off

in a studio somewhere. There's something about this era of film, the *White Christmas, My Fair Lady* and *42nd Street* of it all. That pure entertainment, now lost in the days of grit and realism.

June hadn't noticed, but the film isn't strictly the *Singing in the Rain* that she knows, and that's because of Debbie Reynolds. Her beautiful, smiling, unblemished face is the same as before, initially, and it remains the same still, but imperceptibly at first, the camera begins to zoom in on her face as she sings. The song is ringing out, but you can't even see her raincoat or her umbrella now, just her face, and the oppressively pleasant song is no longer stopping. June supposes that this would be scarier if her voice was distorted or something — is mean June trying to intimidate her? But no, the voice is still pleasant, and the face is still pleasant, but it's so *close,* and her eyes and smile are so large on the big screen that you can see the little glaze that eyeballs have on the big screen, like a high definition picture. But it's not high definition. It's not.

The lyrics are still the lyrics. Everything is still the same. It's just — her face. It's just Debbie Reynolds. And after a while, you can't even hear Gene Kelly or the funny one who sings *Make 'Em Laugh* whose name she always forgets — it's just Debbie, only Debbie on that big screen, bigger and bigger until she's ready to pop, until she's too big for the screen, but she just keeps getting bigger, it just keeps getting closer. The image of Debbie Reynolds's still-smiling lips, still glittering eyes, it is now larger than the enormous film screen was in itself. June tries to turn, to look for the other June — but everywhere she turns, all around her is the stretched enormous face of the late great film star, like elastic.

The other lyrics in the song are inaudible. Only the four words about singing the rain keep telling her to sing in the rain and sing in the rain and singin' in the rain and singing in the rain and singing in the rain and singing in the rain and singing —

June closes her eyes, because she can't bear to look any more, she's probably going to be eaten alive by Debbie Reynolds or something, and it's so stupid and she can't bear it! This is how she's going to die!

When she opens them, *Singing in the Rain* is back to normal. The next scene, absolutely as it was — Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont are attending the premiere of their newest film, and the fashion is glamorous, and it's all normal again. Everything is *fine*.

June breathes a sigh of relief. Looking at Wick's unconcerned face, she does not bother to ask if they just saw whatever the fuck that just was. They clearly, clearly did not. Wick points to beneath the great screen, on the stage beneath it, where they just were before they walked out into the audience and saw Debbie Reynolds' lips eat the world. The other June is standing underneath.

June looks at June again. She's in a state. Her hair is long and tangled, like she's been alone on a desert island for several years, her lip is bloody (understandable, hers is too), she stinks of motor oil and something strangely sour. She *is* electric. June's been thinking about electricity all day, but that's why, because the other June is lightning, lightning in a bottle and she's going and she's going and she's going and

Where did she, where *did* she get that leather jacket?

"From one of the bikers," June answers. She isn't sure about if she got it before or after, though. Isn't time so odd?

Ah, well, that's that then. June shouldn't be surprised. She's… dealing with a killer.

"I didn't kill anyone, you did," June says, adjusting her leather jacket lapels, and looking perturbed about a yellowish stain on it. It's a very June sort of thing to do, worry about stains. Shame she's a *fucking liar*. June would never kill anyone. She wouldn't. She can't. The only reason she knows what it feels like to kill is — is because of *her*.

"Would anyone care to clue me in on the conversation?" Wick asks. "The whole psychic twin thing is incredibly confusing."

June sighs, both of them do. "Sorry," they say.

June looks at the other June's face. She looks so tired. Bloodied, battered, missing a hand. She's just going, and going, like she is, because — well, this

has probably been an incredibly odd day for her too. Which sounds futile, and not like it covers it, really, but how does one describe the indescribable? She can't forgive the whole killing thing though. First things first.

"Where's Terrance?" She asks. "Is he alright?"

"Was gonna put on a movie for him," she answers. "He's fine."

Wick points to Terrance, who is tied up in the front row. They had missed him in the dark. June breathes a sigh of relief. He's a good distance away, and there don't seem to be any bombs or threatening things nearby. Assuming her psychotic Debbie-Reynolds-fan doppelgänger can be stopped by any conventional means.

"It's trying to manifest," the other June says, almost pleading. "It wants things."

Wick is enraptured by the movie on the screen. Just as Terrance is. They're beginning to be eaten. *Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

June doesn't know what to say. She doesn't know what it is. But she can't beat herself in a fight, she figured that out back in the hotel room. She doesn't have any fancy gizmos to work with. In addition, although it *would* be a surreal thing for her enemy to suddenly vanish, the surreal things that happen in Avenue tend to not be in her favour. So the options are little, and this is really the kind of job for the police, ordinarily, but...

"I understand how you feel," she attempts, knowing how pathetic the words sound outside her mouth.

"You don't understand anything about me," June hisses at her. "No one can understand me, I'm fake, I'm a VHS tape, I'm not really a person but I am a person and it's all contradiction and dumb crap." June supposes in a way that makes sense. That's what you *did* use VHS tapes for, mainly, to tape over the television. I mean, that's what her mom did. Before streaming, before DVDs even. You made a copy of something on the television. But that's not really what this other June is. Because they can feel each other's heart beating nervously in each other's chest. And June doesn't think that's just plastic, polyester or even polyethylene. It is.

"But I understand *you."* June says. "The you that doesn't just *want, not* the thing behind it, but *June*. **Us**." June feels the flashes of rage from the other June. She feels like she's being talked down to, like she's worthless. But June knows what it's like to feel worthless. She thinks that, instinctually. And… June also hears, across the room, standing there, in her biker jacket and her blood.

June momentarily gets excited at the thought that she could get through to her. But it makes sense. She hopes she can. She hopes that the other June hears each and every one of these thoughts. But is she being too saccharine? Is this being *too* open? Will this really help? I mean, shouldn't it?

Because they hold the same memories, and memories are like films and books and literature because they… *shape us?* June is bad at being poetic, bad at giving the ends of lessons and the morals of stories, but she *feels*. That's something that she's always done. Constantly feel. And if she can't get through to herself and make her understand this, she can't get through to anyone.

Over and over she's been called a child for feeling, for being, judged by adults with sycophantic ideas of what she must be. Immature, just a silly little girl. Needs to shape up, stop being an overly emotional inadequate. *That's — That's something no one's understood. But you could, maybe. I know whatever is doing this to you is making you hurt. I'm just sorry you also have to deal with what's hurting me now. I'm sorry you have to handle all of my problems.*

Something shaped mostly like a prim and perfect Hollywood housewife's face — not quite Debbie Reynolds, maybe a bit of Lucille Ball, but all lipstick and that sickening smile — begins to dislocate from the other June's spine.

And then it crawls back in. No one sees it. It does not wish to be seen.

June still tries to get through to her. Some of it comes out verbally, out loud in front of her, and some of it is just thought, but she makes sure the other her can hear. She makes sure the other her knows that she is *sorry*. Even if that is such a tiny word — but language is strange like that. She makes sure she knows that she is sorry that she's been dealt a bad hand — oh, dear,

unfortunate wording — that she's had to deal with her pain. Her own pain that isn't hers. And she's sorry about how she romanticises what was, thinking that she'd be better, everyone would be happier if she was back at her mother's house, being insulted, because that's not true either, and you know it. Life isn't exactly like *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler,* you can't hide in museums, but you can still visit them. She's sorry she second guesses every choice she makes, but — but you've got to understand, our mother isn't our fault.

June feels so melodramatic and stupid, but the words are real. And something has changed from the speaking of them.

"She's not my fault," June says, and she isn't sure quite if she believes it every second, but she *does* right now, she earnestly believes it when she's looking into her own horrified and bloodied and tired face. Somehow, when she isn't on her own, it's easier to say.

June isn't on her own anymore.

She steps off the theatre's stage, across the two steps leading down to the audience, and walks up the alley to June. She's hopeless and miserable and awful — but not alone, so she isn't.

For a few seconds, things are perfect. They stop hearing each other's heartbeat, each anxious and angry thought. It is altogether too fleeting, as peace often is.

Then, June is herself. She is one. And she believes in some of what she has just said. Just enough of it, enough for there to not be regret — that strange twist of nostalgia still in her veins. Just enough for it to *go.*

There is nothing to eat. The wicked housewife grin, the flashing eyes of Julie Andrews and Hollywood glamour are gone faster than words can say. Still no one sees them — because nostalgia isn't tangible. It's flickering, it's there, something can mean the world, and just like that, it's nothing.

Looking out on the stage, alone, She breathes deep. No giving up. No listening to yourself, because you're your own worst enemy. She's going. She's going forward. She tells herself, repeatedly:

It's over. It's over.

Because that makes it more concrete, those two little words, and really, she has no idea. *Please, God, let this be the end of it.* She should feel on top of the world. She should feel free and fuller than before, and her head should be spinning and singing.

But the world is still going around her. She's still here. She still has things to do.

She walks over, leans down, checks Terrance's body, checks Wick's body — they're fine, it's like they're sleeping.

It's over. It is. It's over. She was right, but — but won't something happen again? She thought she was free when she left the motel, didn't she?

Standing there in the theatre, and even without regret, even though she is better than she was, she doesn't magically know what to do. She doesn't know what will happen next. What she *can* do next.

And her hand… her hand *aches.*

* * *

"You've made a good first impression," Anthea notes smugly, and the sentence rubs June the wrong way as she sits down in the back room of the bar.

She's dealt with the connotations of repetition all day, and the very act of those words going over and over feels subtly aggressive. It's an anxiety-ridden room, but perhaps that's just bars in general for her — and she can hear the people in said bar, back to normal outside their little room. Cheering, cavorting, guffawing and chanting lyrics to Dua Lipa. It's normal, much more normal then it's been, but still, it feels like Avenue, full of vice, wood and concrete. She knows there's sin outside this room. She knew she believed in Jesus, but she was never quite sure she believed in sin before.

Perhaps now that she's in the gutter, she's realising that she's quite privileged indeed.

Anthea is drumming her fingers on the coffee table (being sure not to make too coherent a rhythm and let any spirits in) and she's looking at June.

"You're really very good," she says, like that's an entire conversation on its own.

Everything just feels *insincere*. June nods. She is getting good at the art of nodding. "Where were you?" she asks. She's still not over being abandoned at the theatre. She's not over any of this, and she doubts she will be for some time. Living in the present is all she can manage.

"Protecting my interests," Anthea says, getting up from the coffee table and checking upon the drink cabinets, which are in the same room as this… *office space*. Anthea purloins a small vial of …gin — is it gin? — from the cabinet, placing a shushing finger to her lips. She seems giddy. This, too, fades. She places the liquor back in the cabinet.

The conspiratorial side of June wonders if the whole business with the theatre and how she simply hung back was a test — but she pushes that idea to one side. Too many variables for Anthea to be aware of. That'd be the work of a machiavellian super-genius with no regard for human decency. Right?

Anthea continues to look at June with her silver eyes. There is a deep emotion in them, they are not dispassionate, there is *empathy* in them, and it *feels* like she cares. It's sudden, and it's not the way she was looking at her before, but… but it's something.

"What now?" June asks.

Anthea's face twinkles with interest. "What indeed? Life has the troublesome tendency to never stop for anything."

June agrees with this. She can feel the world spinning around her, even right now, when she's trying to catch her breath. She can hear it — maybe like an aria, or maybe just the drunken people outside through the thin walls.

"You speak in riddles, a lot of the time," June says. "There's one that keeps bugging me."

"By all means, speak freely."

"The Latin one," June says. "When we first met — if you'll pardon me calling that meeting — you left me a message. Most of which I got the point of. Laws of the Motel Room, the problem being the analog cassette tape — nostalgia being what the other me wanted. From the bar, from the theatre, from the people… but you asked me something in Latin as well."

"Ah, yes." Anthea says, smiling thinly. "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Ah, yes. I think you've heard the translation before — 'who watches the watchmen?'… Now, what did I mean by that?" The words are playful, almost mocking. She places a finger to her chin in faux deep thought. "I'm not sure I speak in riddles, really…"

"Nevermind," June huffs. She stands to go.

"Have you seen Avenue lately?" Anthea asks, removing a bottle of nail polish from her desk drawer. "It's *rotting*. The town, the people — they're sick. Something is creeping over the horizon, storm clouds, maybe."

June doesn't know if asking Anthea for further clarification will even help. At least it's a simple sentence, even if it ends ambiguously. The conspiratorial thoughts in her brain are playing up again. Especially since Anthea is all smiles and candy and rainbows right now. June tries a different tactic, maybe the truth will change how Anthea reacts. "I don't think I trust you," she says.

"Then you're wise. But *listen*." Anthea says, still smiling. "I'm not going to ask the world of you, I just — I'd prefer if you didn't go far. You're looking for purpose, aren't you, June? It's a small town. A friend can help you find it."

June isn't sure if she knows what she's in for. Shacking up with a bunch of people the town affectionately calls *Idiots?* Who do *this* kind of stuff on a daily basis?

But where else can she go? She sighs, and takes Anthea's extended hand. They shake. This will be fine. For a few days, maybe.

* * *

Terrance hands her a pair of keys with a green rubber fob on them, and she trudges upstairs as the barflies play on. The splinters have been repaired — maybe a little shoddily… but the barflies are even more invigorated than the new bits of wall. It's like they've forgotten the day's turmoil entirely.

"Thank you for your business," he says, his voice silky smooth, as she steps up the gangway into the loft.

She nods. The stairs lead to the loft, and the loft is bigger than she thought it would be, with doors leading to separate rooms, which doesn't really make it a loft, does it? But it's room and board, for now, at the very least. And June doesn't mind as long as she has a place to sleep, to sleep without fitful dreams, and worry about these things more thoroughly in the morning.

She'll get out of this place, she tells herself.

The hallway is, as most things are in Avenue, creaky and dim. June steps forward, June steps on, and June keeps going, keeps going, until she reaches her door.

The key fits perfectly in the lock, and turns smoothly, naturally, effortlessly.

She opens the door.

She nearly screams. No. The room is slant, with a dutch angle. No. It is a beige room, with a maroon bed, and dull lumpy pillows. No No No. On the back wall there is a print of the Last Supper. No. No. It seems just like the motel room she was in before, like it is all going back, like there's nothing like it never ends like it never ends like she's going she's going and she's going down into the pit, *forever.*

And then she notices, steadily, that the room is different in many ways. The bed is on the wrong wall. There is an armchair by the window. There is no television.

It is a perfectly and completely ordinary room. It is just an apartment. *For fuck's sake, June.* It's just a normal apartment. The painting isn't even of the Last Supper. *Keep it together!*

June trudges into the room with the weight of the world, even though she is carrying nothing. She breathes a sigh of contention, collapsing onto the shitty bed. June does nothing to stop the forces of gravity from slowly sliding her handbag down her hanging arm and off the side of the bed, onto the floor. She's exhausted. She's been going, and going, and going.

And lying on the bed, she falls asleep.

She stops.

Afterword

You will forgive me if the words sound simplistic, basic, even, but thank you for reading the beginning of *Disparate Minds*. Every story starts somewhere, and us fans of a particular blue box based franchise tend to show our influences on our sleeve. This story began with me being quite introspective after seeing the film *Inland Empire,* and if you liked this sort of thing, you'll very possibly like that film too. It's different, of course. I'm no plagiarist. But there is something so fascinating about the nature of identity, isn't there? That had me thinking about memories, and that had me thinking about rose-tinted glasses. So that is where it began.

Perhaps it is overzealous of me to write an afterword to a novella of all things — this is certainly no in-depth book, but I have always been very fascinated by the ends of books, those little pages that hold final thoughts, and acknowledgements of people I have absolutely no clue about. It's a peek into something else, and I always read them. As such, I would like to briefly thank my editors, Theta, Ostara and Aristide, my friends Hazel, Osmo, Sisi and Jen, my former English teachers, Big Charles, and my family, who will probably hate this but read it anyway. See? That's a whole bunch of stuff that you can think about! The power of Afterwords. *Who are these people?*

I hope this to be the beginning of something special, and larger than myself. And I also hope I haven't frightened you off… Because there are things in the wood, and the shadows, and the search for answers is only just beginning…

About the Author

Plum Pudding is the proud creator of *The Noodle Man* and *Disparate Minds*, which is sort of like being the creator of both happiness and the electric chair. They love ridiculous pen names, long walks on the beach, and screaming as loud as they can in department stores. They can be found on the Doctor Who Discord. This is their first work for the Cheshire House.